34

Soviet Literature

5

FOREIGN LANGUAGES PUBLISHING HOUSE
PRINTED IN THE SOVIET UNION
1947

GEORGI BEREZKO

A NIGHT IN THE LIFE OF A COMMANDER

Companies of reinforcements, detrained at a war-blasted station, stood around on the wet platform and gazed at the heaps of brick and rubble, the bare roof beams, a remnant of concrete wall with a big arrow painted on it and pointing to empty space. The train had gone and they felt themselves cut off from the world they knew. It was cold, they stood with their backs to the wind and a blue tinge came into their faces from the damp spring air. The battalion commander, a captain in a crumpled greatcoat walked past them, only to return some time later and pace silently up and down the platform. The soldiers watched their commander from a distance, trying to guess what the future had in store for them.

"What are we waiting for, anyway?" asked Nikolai Ulanov, a youth with a round, pleasant face. "I'm at the front. . . So, that's what it looks like," he thought looking round with some trepidation but scarcely seeing anything in his excitement.

Silence reigned in this war-torn wilderness. A piece of loose sheet iron rattled slightly in the wind and the water streaming along the rails gurgled softly. But this very silence alarmed Ulanov, silence in a realm that lay beyond the boundaries of ordinary life. The lad was boiling over with impatience and could not understand the strange immobility of his companies. He wanted to get into action, to dig trenches, in other words he wanted to act as one acts at the front.

"Why are we standing here?" repeated Ulanov, without waiting for an answer.

"You're in a hurry, Moscovite," came the sarcastic reply from Kulagin, a soldier of about forty. His light-coloured, unfriendly eyes that stood out against a face in the shadow, looked at Nikolai from under a tarpaulin hood.

"It's pretty miserable standing here," said Ulanov and licked his red lips. He had taken off his gloves to make it easier to shoot if need be and he gripped his rifle tightly with fingers already turning white; he no longer noticed the weight of the weapon.

"You'll soon get your share of lying yet," said Kulagin. "And there's no reason to get fed up. . . Time enough for that. . . ."

The others did not speak and Ulanov was at a loss to understand their indifference, not only to each other but also to their own fate. The battalion commander made his way to a felt-roofed timber structure not far from the station. The wind rustled the groundsheets some of the troops were wearing, and blew them out in huge balloons.

The sounds of an accordion floated across the station and Nikolai saw Kolechkin coming towards his group. Kolechkin was a Red Army man wearing the jaunty short jacket of a pilot, his grey Astrakhan cap was pushed forward almost on to his eyes and his greenish groundsheet, tied loosely in front, rose over his shoulders like wings. He was carrying a fine-looking accordion, decorated in mother-of-pearl and his fingers now and again ran over the keys.

Kolechkin stretched his instrument to the full extent of the bellows, bent it fanwise and slowly closed it. A long mournful sound pierced the air.

"The sergeant major says the trucks haven't come," said a man whose face was purple from the cold and whose name Ulanov did not know. "They won't be here tonight with the roads like this. . . And nobody knows whether we're going to get any dinner or not. . . ."

"In the meantime we can bask in the sun," said Kolechkin.

He again stretched out his accordion, this time making it sing a sad, melodious

---

Abridged version.

tune. Leaning his head as though he wanted to catch a lost note, and smiling with his lazy-looking black eyes he moved on to another group. Nikolai watched him with mixed feelings of envy and chagrin. The careless splendour of this air force lieutenant who had been reduced to the ranks aroused in Ulanov an inexplicable protest. It was really splendid with the dangers of battle so near, but nevertheless it offended Ulanov by making his nervousness the more apparent.

"Where do we go next?" asked Ryabyshev, addressing all and sundry: he was a young, deep-chested private with greyish, cracked lips.

"We'll be kept in reserve for a bit," explained Kulagin calmly.

"Why?" asked Nikolai in a tense voice.

"Wet weather. . . Spring. . . ."

"What's spring got to do with it? D'you think they only fight when it's dry?" objected Ulanov.

Kulagin looked at him and then winked at Ryabyshev, sourly and without a smile.

"In Moscow there's asphalt everywhere, underground railways, culture," he began, "but in the fields your feet get stuck in the mud and you can't pull 'em out."

"Of course," said Ryabyshev, brightening up a bit, "it gets kind of sticky."

"There's always a lull in spring. . . Grub's bad though, no transport," added Kulagin.

"That's nonsense," Ulanov again objected. Nevertheless he felt a bit easier at the idea that there would be no fighting that day or even the next. Kulagin was fresh from hospital, he had already been at the front and you could take his word for it.

"They won't leave us without rations, you can be sure, nor without ammo," Ulanov burst out. He did not want to admit that he was secretly glad and he argued to combat his gladness.

"Where are you from, smarty?!" said Kulagin in astonishment.

"I know they won't, that's all. . . Suvorov crossed the Alps and that was harder than paddling in mud."

"Suvorov didn't have tanks. . . He wouldn't be able to cross them now with motors . . ." said Kulagin.

Ulanov suddenly felt his heart beating faster. Some of the men were arguing against Kulagin's prophecy, and Nikolai stood listening to further proofs of the possible postponement of the coming trial. He was the more satisfied with this idea because having honestly prepared to go into battle he had nothing to reproach himself with.

The men began to split up into smaller groups. Some had dragged boxes out from under the rubble and were sitting on them, and two of the Red Army men had lit a fire on the platform. The wood was wet, smoked a lot and the pale flame died out before it had caught the planks.

"Have you seen the battalion commander? Where is he?" asked a high-pitched musical voice from behind Ulanov's back. Nikolai turned round and saw a slightly-built girl in a greatcoat too big for her and a fuzzy fur hat resting on her pink ears.

"Are we going to hang around here for long?" asked Masha Ryzhova. Her hands in the wide, turned-up sleeves were thrust into her pockets; a kitbag hung from her back.

"I don't understand what's going on," said Ulanov loudly. He looked in astonishment at the small oval face with a rather broad nose and bright blue eyes. The wind brought tears to those eyes and they shone so brightly that there seemed to be lamps behind them; the girl's long eyelashes curled upwards and spread out fanwise. She met Nikolai's eyes with a look of independence but the tiny figure of the girl in the rough greatcoat looked childlike to him, and just a trifle sad.

"I'll wait a little longer and then I'll go on alone," said Masha with determination.

"What d'you mean, alone? Didn't you come on the train?" asked Nikolai. "Just a child," he thought to himself, touched. "What can she do at the front? Why is she here?"

"I'm on my own," said Masha, as though this gave her a mysterious advantage.

Without giving Nikolai another look, she went on towards the station.

"Wait a bit. . . I'll come with you! . . " shouted Nikolai; his feelings being a mixture of nobility and egoism: he was afraid of losing the girl.

A few minutes later he and the girl stopped in front of the ruins of the station building which stood on a big empty cobbled square. Three sides of the square were lined with burnt-out buildings and blackened gardens. Masha had not found the

battalion commander, and Nikolai was afraid she really would set off alone.

"Did you get any breakfast this morning? Would you like something to eat?" he enquired solicitously.

"That's a question only a woman might ask," said Masha and Nikolai smiled gleefully. He hurriedly threw off his kitbag, spread a white napkin on the stones, placed several packages on it and even got out a little glass saltcellar.

"Take some, please," he invited as he removed the paper from sausage, pies, peppermint cookies and eggs. "Please, take some. . . ."

"Oo! . . " exclaimed the girl in astonishment.

"Just imagine, mother brought all this to the station. . . She got there at the last minute. . . We didn't even have time for a talk. . . ."

The girl seemed to have accepted Nikolai's protection, and he hurried to tell her all about himself. He told her that the recruiting office had sent him at first to a telegraph school where he was to have spent a year in training. That did not satisfy him and after a lot of effort he managed to get detailed for the front as a volunteer.

"You understand me, I just couldn't listen to the communiqués," Ulanov explained.

"I understand," Masha said restrainedly.

"I think everybody understands, although I don't think I convinced mother. . . Eat, do eat, try this meat with a cookie, it's good."

"Your mother must have used up a month's ration to give you all this," said the girl.

"I suppose so," answered Nikolai in that hopeless tone that seems to say, "What can we do if they love us so much. . . ."

"Who are your parents?" enquired Masha.

"They're what they call professional people . . ." Nikolai smiled in gratitude at this manifestation of interest in him. He went on to tell her that his father was a doctor, at present serving on the Southern Front, and his mother was a teacher in Moscow; his sister was still at school, in the seventh class and he had entered the tenth class, and did not know when he would be able to finish his schooling.

"The war's only just begun, we've a lot of fighting to do," Ulanov concluded with conviction.

Masha screwed up her eyes and looked at him. "A lot of fighting you will do!" her glance seemed to say. Aloud she said: "All the way to Berlin?"

"Naturally. We were expecting this war, weren't we? We have never forgotten that we have to fight for the right to live a free and sane life. . . The revolutionaries fought against tsarism for that reason, then against the intervention. . . Our turn has come to fight the fascists. . . But why don't you eat, you're not eating a thing."

Nikolai offered the girl a patty.

"They've got jam in them. . . Please. . . ." He paused for a moment. "It's like a relay race. . . The fight is passed on from generation to generation. . . I am going into the battle as if I inherited it. . . ."

"Thanks for the meal," said Masha jumping up. "Your mother makes nice patties."

"Damn it all, I nearly forgot. I have some candy. . ." Nikolai held out a tin box. "Lemon drops. . . D'you like them?"

"Not much," said the girl. All Nikolai's efforts to please her only led to his showing himself as unnatural, groundlessly self-confident, and supercilious. "Showing off," thought Masha disapprovingly as she sucked the acid drop.

"I'm going," she announced.

"Listen, you'd better come with us," suggested Nikolai. "Suppose I carry her kitbag, is that allowed in the army?" he thought.

"Why?" asked Masha suspiciously.

"The front. . . Unknown places. . . ."

"D'you call this the front?"

"Have you been here before?"

"Been in hospital a bit," said Masha. She ran quickly down the steps, looked back at him and the wind seemed to carry her away.

"See you again," shouted Nikolai after her.

"Better not meet me again, better keep out of trouble," the girl shouted back at him merrily.

Ulanov sat on the steps of the station building for a few moments finishing his patty. Suddenly the troops came hurrying into the square, orders rang out, and Nikolai ran to take his place in the ranks.

The company to which he belonged marched out onto the highway that passed the town on the far side. . . .

It was already the end of April and the dirty road was swimming with the snow water. There was still hard, frozen snow in the ditches and under the bushes but very little was left in the open fields .The ruts were filled with sticky, dough-like mud. Here and there they disappeared in huge puddles or turned off the road onto the semiliquid ploughlands. Now and again the men passed derelict automobiles sunk deep in the mud like ships at anchor in a misty sea.

The troops broke formation and straggled along the edges of the road. Their heavy boots slipped on lumps of ice or sank into the liquid clay. The wind struck them first head on and then from the side, so bitingly cold that they turned their faces away from it.

Ulanov searched in vain for the girl, although deep in his heart he hoped that his next meeting with her would be much later when his deeds rather than his intentions would speak for him. His pride was hurt and, as is usual in such cases, he comforted himself by falling back on his imagination. Before very long he completely lost consciousness of what was going on around him, thinking about the future. The pictures he painted for himself were not much different from those that excite the imagination of all youngsters—the battlefield, the wound after the heroic deed, the nurse bandaging the hero, the medal pinned on his breast in front of the whole battalion—but for all that they lost nothing of their attractiveness. The very fact of their being common property only served to render them more pleasant.

A rumble of thunder sounded through the mist ahead of them. It was followed by a second and third. . . Somewhere beyond the horizon the earth seemed to be coughing. Ryabyshev stopped and lifted his head.

"How do you like it?" asked Kulagin as he caught up with him.

"Shut up, let's listen," said the young soldier.

"That music will follow you to your grave."

"Perhaps I won't be killed," said Ryabyshev without much confidence. "How d'you know?"

Kulagin looked penetratingly at his comrade.

"Some people only get wounded," he said, "but there are wounds worse than death."

Kulagin marched on but Ryabyshev hesitated, looking around uneasily. He felt helpless and therefore afraid. He was lonely for he had not yet had time to find friends, and he was miserable because he was lonely. In ragged lines the soldiers marched on across the empty, gloomy plain, bending under the weight of their packs.

The man ahead of Ulanov slipped on a piece of sloping ground and barely kept his feet. Nikolai, coming behind him, almost fell. He stepped awkwardly, tried to regain his balance and winced from a sudden pain in his ankle. Ryabyshev, wrapped in thought, staggered past; his pink cheeks had a blue tinge to them. Nikolai tried to walk on but the pain was too great. He stood still for a few seconds, not knowing what to do next. Then he selected a place, limped over to it, sat down on his bag and began to unfasten his puttee. The men wandered on along the road and stared at Ulanov with incurious eyes. Only Kulagin came slowly towards him.

"What's wrong?" asked the soldier pulling his tobacco pouch out.

"Nothing much. . . Twisted my ankle . . ." said Nikolai.

"Like an old sweat already," said Kulagin as he rolled himself a cigarette. "Too bad. . . And you haven't reached the Alps yet," he continued.

Nikolai did not answer, and pulled off his boot.

"Better report to the commander," advised Kulagin as he went on.

Then Ulanov saw the familiar figure of the girl amongst the soldiers on the road. He was both glad and confused and held his head down. He even turned away in an effort to remain unnoticed, at the same time faintly hoping that she would see him.

"Gone lame?" asked Masha Ryzhova in her singing voice.

"Yes, this foot. . . It's nothing, of course. . . " Ulanov hurriedly tried to push his foot back into his boot so that his dirty, wet footcloth would not show.

"Let me have a look," said the girl.

"What for," protested Nikolai. "Why should you, it's only a sprain."

"I'll take a look at it, though," said Masha.

She sat down on the snow and pulled Nikolai's foot towards herself.

"I'll take it off," said the scared lad.

"Just sit still," the girl said, looking up at him and seeing a face that was flushed with a deep red.

"I can't find anything, you must have pulled a muscle," she said to Ulanov in a loud voice.

"Thanks very much," said Nikolai, hiding his bare foot under his greatcoat.

"Let me put a tight bandage on it."

"Oh, don't bother," he protested.

Masha looked penetratingly at him. The spreading rays of her eyelashes trembled and her face had a haughty look.

"How long d'you intend sitting here, then?" she asked. "D'you want a rest... Stretch out your foot."

Without paying any more attention to Nikolai's stammering explanations, she took a field dressing out of her pocket and ripped off the paper. Ulanov did not speak but looked at Masha in horror, suddenly realizing that she suspected him of wanting to drop behind the column. The girl fixed the bandage, sat up and looked at her handiwork.

"Put on your footcloth," she ordered, "take the part that's dry... There, like that... Now put your boot on!"

She rinsed her fingers in the icy water of a puddle, wiped them on the skirt of her greatcoat and put on her gloves.

"We'll do our share of sitting down after the war, my dear comrade," said the girl pedantically but in somewhat softer tones. "Stand up and give me your hand."

"I didn't ask for help," muttered Ulanov desperately. He hurriedly adjusted his pack, picked up his rifle and joined the column.

"It'll soon be all right," said the girl, "by tonight you'll dance with me. Lean on my shoulder, if you like." The girl had not taken offence at Nikolai's last words, as though all the sting that Nikolai had put into them had passed her by.

A tarpaulin covered jeep, slithering lightly over the fields came to a halt a few paces away. A heavily-built man in a leather coat climbed out of the jeep with obvious difficulty. He stood watching the men for a moment and then said something to the officer that followed him as he left the car.

"The GOC!" whispered Masha Ryzhova with something like a sigh. There was frank curiosity on her face, as she pulled her hands out of her pockets and stood to attention.

"The GOC?" asked Ulanov in the same sort of whisper, forgetting all his own troubles for a moment.

"Lieutenant General... I've seen him before. A man of steel," said Masha with conviction.

They watched the general bend his knees and straighten them time and again, to stretch his legs. He took a pair of spectacles out of a side pocket, wiped the lenses with a handkerchief, and slowly put them on.

"Does he always travel like that?" asked Ulanov with interest.

"Flies around everywhere on that jeep, all along the front. He's awfully reckless," answered Masha without turning her head.

"Does he go alone?"

"Why alone? He's got his adjutant with him."

The general bent over a bush and broke off a twig with empty seed pods at the end of it. Shaking the twig he walked over to the road. The little captain, the battalion commander, ran past Ulanov and Masha to meet the general. The officer halted, stood to attention and saluted; the wind carried his words away and Nikolai only caught odd phrases of the report.

The general listened in silence and began peeling the bark off the twig he held in his hands.

"How many men have you brought?" he asked.

The captain answered, and the GOC put a few more questions about the equipment and armament of the reserve battalion. Then he lifted his head and glanced down the road. For a second his glance rested on Ulanov whose heart fluttered at the thought that the general might address him. But the general was now looking past Ulanov at a group of soldiers standing some distance away, and at the file of other infantrymen strung out along the edge of the road. The sucking and wheezing of the mud under many feet could be plainly heard.

"You won't get to your destination very soon," said the GOC in a voice that betrayed age but was still powerful. "Or perhaps you aren't in a hurry?"

"I'm sorry, Comrade Lieutenant Gen-

eral! The road's pretty bad," answered the captain, his fingers straying to his belt.

"What time did you detrain?" asked the GOC. When he heard that the troops had been at the station for a long time, he cursed angrily and Ulanov looked at the captain in alarm.

"There were no trucks, Comrade General! I was told there would be trucks. . . I could not get through. . ." The officer tried to explain, his voice growing louder with excitement.

"What trucks did you expect? You said yourself the road's bad," said the GOC.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry, Comrade General," repeated the captain.

"Sorry, sorry. . . What am I supposed to do with your apologies? Make myself a coat out of them?" began the general angrily. "By dusk the battalion must be at Sukhanovo," he continued. "They've been waiting there for you for two days. . . Don't halt for dinner, let the men eat as they march. . . Get that? If you don't arrive in time I'll have you court-martialed."

"May I start?" begged the captain in a high-pitched voice.

The general did not answer, walked over to his jeep, stopped and turned around.

"Take a look at your men," he said. "their bayonets are hanging from their rifle barrels. . . If they spoil the sights, how are they going to shoot?"

He looked at the twig in his hands as though he did not know where it had come from, and threw it down on the snow. Then he climbed into the jeep, the motor roared and the car dashed away across the fields, throwing up dirt behind it.

Masha Ryzhova pressed her hands to her breast and sighed loudly.

"Oh, everything went cold inside me when he jumped at the captain," she said.

Ulanov took his bayonet off his rifle barrel and hung it on the ramrod. "So he noticed that," he thought. He was pale and his lower lip trembled.

"He had reason to jump at him," he said gloomily. He felt very insignificant compared to that stern commander who had appeared suddenly and then hurried on in the direction everybody was going.

"There was no reason for hanging about the station," he added.

"He's terribly exacting, this general," said Masha, "he doesn't sit in headquarters, spends all the time with the troops."

"He's pretty old," put in Ulanov.

"You try working your way up to Lieutenant General," answered the girl.

The conversation was broken off when the company fell in. When Nikolai heard the order, he hurried to his place, scarcely feeling the pain in his ankle.

"Will you get along all right?" asked Masha loudly.

"I'm here not to hang back," Nikolai threw the words over his shoulder.

He saw her again as the company passed a hillock on which the girl ran up to watch them march past.

Ulanov's reserve company was sent to reinforce a battalion commanded by Senior Lieutenant Gorbunov. The young battalion commander met the newcomers, talked to them and was dissatisfied. His battalion, experienced in battle but badly thinned out, would not be made any stronger by these reinforcements, most of whom had never been under fire before. He did not have a chance to have a closer look at them, however, for he got a call from regimental headquarters. On the way he heard that the GOC Army was at headquarters. Those who had any experience with Lieutenant General Ryabinin said that he was stern, even harsh. Gorbunov tried to imagine what the results of the GOC's visit would be, and assumed the worst.

Gorbunov dismounted from his horse near a little lonely brick house at the end of the village. There were two muddy jeeps beside the fence; tommy gunners in steel helmets sat on the rails of the porch. It was getting dark and the wet log cabins down the street looked quite black.

The outer room was crowded with officers and orderlies. Gorbunov looked round and saw Zuyev, the Divisional Commander's adjutant.

"Is the colonel here, too?" asked the battalion commander, straightening the Sam Browne over his greatcoat.

"They're all here," answered Zuyev. His dark, boyish face was unusually serious, even mysterious. Gorbunov took the adjutant aside.

"What's the GOC like? . . I've never seen him . . ." he asked in a whisper.

"You'll see in a minute," was Zuyev's indefinite answer.

"They say he flares up easily."

"He can make it hot for you," agreed the adjutant.

"I'm scared of the big bugs," said Gorbunov merrily.

"Go on in, he's waiting for you," whispered Zuyev.

In the small back room, divided off by a curtain, Gorbunov saw a stout man with greyish-white hair, sitting at a table. It was difficult to see his face in the twilight: his eyes behind the glasses were lost in shadows. On the general's left sat Colonel Bogdanov. He smiled at the lieutenant, his strong white teeth flashing in the darkness. In the rear, near the curtain, was the tall figure of Major Nikolayevsky, the regimental commander. Gorbunov halted in the doorway and reported his arrival.

"Good evening, Gorbunov," said the Army Commander in a dull, loud voice. "Tell them to bring in a light, I can't see a thing," he said turning to Nikolayevsky.

The general did not say another word. He placed his big, heavy hands on the map that was spread on the table, and his head sank into his shoulders. Bogdanov turned away from the Senior Lieutenant and looked absentmindedly at the darkening window. . . He and the Army Commander seemed to have forgotten Gorbunov who never took his eyes off them.

Nikolayevsky returned, followed by a soldier with a lamp, a little tin thing that looked like a meat can. The soldier pulled a blanket down over the window, and struck a match. Nikolayevsky bent over the lamp to adjust it—his long, bony figure and his black moustache casting a shadow on the blind.

"Sit down, Lieutenant," said the GOC. "Sit at the table. . . ."

"Have your reinforcements arrived?" he asked after Gorbunov had taken his place at the table.

"Yes, Comrade Lieutenant General."

Gorbunov was tempted to complain about the poor quality of the new troops, but he held his peace for the time being, expecting the general to ask about them.

"They're pretty raw," said the GOC, apparently guessing Gorbunov's thoughts. "I saw them on their way here. But it won't take you long to make soldiers out of them, will it?"

"It won't," answered Gorbunov confidently, to his own surprise. "And I was going to complain," he thought.

The GOC was silent for a minute or two. The lamp lit up his face from below—it was big, with heavy jowls that made it look square—it seemed almost immobile, as though it were hewn out of some dark wood; the grey, close-cropped hair on his head was lighter in colour than his brown skin; the eyes behind the glasses were cold and penetrating.

"I've heard about you, Gorbunov," said the general. "I remember that attack of yours across the swamp. . . ."

"Thank you, Comrade Lieutenant General," said the battalion commander snapping out each word with precision. "Am I getting a decoration?" he thought, pleasantly excited.

"Show me your positions," said the general, pointing to a map that was covered in lines, red and blue rings and triangles. Then he asked about the enemy facing the battalion, his every position and fire system, Gorbunov answered with precision, displaying an excellent knowledge of his job. Yet he felt a certain disappointment.

"Well, Comrade Senior Lieutenant, you will start the ball rolling this time," emphasizing the "you". "Give your orders, Major," he said to Nikolayevsky.

Nikolayevsky walked over to the table, coughed and stroked his heavy, upturned moustache.

"Here is your objective. . . The written orders will follow immediately," began the major. His hoarse speech—he had caught a chill a long time before—was broken by frequent pauses as he searched for the right word. The very officiousness of the senior officers worried Gorbunov. The major, too, seemed uncomfortable under the glances of his seniors. Gorbunov soon stopped worrying about the manner in which the order was given, for the content of the instructions took his breath away. The regiment was to attack the enemy, break through a heavily fortified line, continue the movement forward at high speed and reach the railway. Gorbunov was to make the first attack and pave the way for the other battalions. A company of

reserve troops had been sent up to reinforce his unit. The main body of the troops would only join battle when the spearhead had driven deep into enemy positions. The senior lieutenant felt it would never come to this because the forces under his command were insufficient.

"Comrade Lieutenant General," said Gorbunov, "may I ask the Major a question?"

The GOC nodded.

"What outside support can I count on to make the breach?"

Nikolayevsky repeated that Gorbunov could depend only on the regiment's own guns and a slightly enlarged group of mortars. Gorbunov, somewhat dismayed, looked silently at the GOC and then at the colonel. "Why are they issuing such orders?" he wondered, and his eyes seemed to be asking that question. "We'll get stuck in the mud long before we reach the German positions. How can we start an offensive at this time of the year?" were the thoughts that ran quickly through his head. "And then to break through such defences with a few companies... We need concentrated artillery and good air cover... You both know that, why don't you say something?..."

Calmly, almost brutally, the general met the young lieutenant's eyes. The Divisional Commander's young, pleasant-looking face with its broad forehead and short nose, wore an expression of sternness. Bogdanov could understand the feelings of the young lieutenant who, apparently, had little chance of success. The main drive, however, was not to be effected here but on a neighbouring sector where heavy artillery was already concentrated. Nikolayevsky and Gorbunov were to keep the enemy busy and attract their reserves. A major offensive operation was to follow but they were not to know anything about it.

"Your battalion will take the lead, Gorbunov... You will go ahead and you are the first I shall hold responsible," said the general. "Remember this: If I get any other report except 'Line Kamenskoye-Khotkovo reached,' I shall not accept it. If you don't reach your objective you had better not come back!"

"May I go, Comrade Lieutenant General?" said Gorbunov loudly and determinedly as he rose from his seat. He stood at the table so that the light of the lamp left his face in the shadow. He was too experienced an officer not to realize the real nature of the task set for him and his battalion. Therefore why bother asking for assistance sufficient to enable him carry out the orders when nobody expected him to do anything more than die bravely. There would apparently be a successful offensive somewhere but he and his men would never learn of it.

"Yes, carry on, Comrade Senior Lieutenant," said the GOC.

The general threw back his head to get a better look at the battalion commander. Colonel Bogdanov sat up straight in his chair and frowned. Both of them could see the whites of the lieutenant's eyes gleaming somewhere up near the ceiling. "A real hero, he understands the situation," thought the colonel looking up at the tall figure whose head was lost in the gloom. He wanted to wish him "good luck" but refrained. At that moment the colonel's whole attitude towards the subaltern changed. In the past he had merely thought of him as a good officer, now he knew him as an officer of distinction. From now on his very existence was an act of heroism while the others would go on living as ordinary men. Although these ideas were not very clearly defined in Colonel Bogdanov's mind, he felt a very strong desire to express his gratitude, not as a superior officer, but as a man. He did not say a word, however, for he did not know how to thank a man for showing contempt for death.

The general stood up and held out his hand to the lieutenant. As Gorbunov leaned over the table to shake hands with his general, the light from the lamp showed up his smooth, damp forehead, his splendid blond hair, brushed straight back except for one lock that had fallen forward. Bogdanov jumped up impulsively and squeezed the lieutenant's shoulders. Without any sign of surprise Gorbunov looked down at the colonel. He was a head taller than his superior. The colonel went back to his seat, and Gorbunov replaced his cap, turned on his heel and left.

After Gorbunov had gone the general pushed his glasses up on to his forehead and kept wiping his temples for a long time.

"I know what you're thinking, Nikolayevsky," he began. "You're thinking

that we've cooked up a fine stew and don't know how we're going to dish it out."

"No, I am not, Comrade Lieutenant General," Nikolayevsky's hoarse voice was dull and expressionless.

"Why do you say 'No'. We're starting a battle that is against all the rules. We want to put an offensive across flooded land in a way nobody has ever launched even an attack. We're going to attack on a sector that is impassable. You think that we are experienced people who are acting like fools... That's what you're thinking, isn't it, Major?"

"It will be a tough job, Comrade Lieutenant General," said Major Nikolayevsky. "The whole terrain is swamp and low-lying...."

"Soldiering has never been an easy job... You should see my sappers—they can scarcely keep on their feet. And did you see the road behind your section—twenty-nine kilometres of log-built corduroy! Tomorrow they'll bring up that road as far as the station. A first class road! Get shaken up a bit when you travel on it, that's all."

"I saw the road. A splendid job..." agreed the major.

"The Germans won't expect us to come crawling up to them through the mud, will they?"

"Of course, they won't," Nikolayevsky confirmed.

"There you are... A soldier's job is never easy...."

The general got up.

"Well, Major, aren't you going to serve us some tea?"

Gorbunov spent the next two days getting his battalion ready for the attack. On the third day Gorbunov's company took up a position in the wood from which the attack was to be launched. There was a fine rain falling and the soldiers were soon lost in the wet darkness when they turned off the road. They felt their way past wet tree trunks, stumbled over slippery wet roots, pushing dripping branches away from their faces. With their hands held out in front of them, the men moved forward like divers on the sea bed, in depths inaccessible to light. Juniper twigs caught them by the feet and the icy raindrops trickled down their necks. Ulanov groped his way like a man blindfolded. He was more afraid of losing touch with his comrades than of anything else. He hurried and his neighbours, who all had the same feeling also hurried. The wood was filled with the cracking of branches, rustling of leaves and splashing of water. Now and then Nikolai felt somebody's elbow in his side or heard somebody's heavy breathing... He stared intently into the darkness but saw only indistinct patches.

It took them a long time to reach their positions although they did not travel far. When the company finally halted they were all worn out. The darkness separated them from each other and made them crowd together in a bunch, talking to find out who their neighbours were. The section commanders called the names of their men in a loud whisper. Ulanov stood with his back to a tree, and leant against it with a feeling of relief.

This drudgery of war had used up all Nikolai's physical and spiritual strength. Now he realized that endless physical toil was the soldier's lot in war: before attacking he had to march, drag heavy loads, spend days on end without undressing, put up with the cold, and sleep but little. In the log cabin where they had spent the night sleeping closely packed side by side, it had been difficult to breathe: in the dugouts, acrid smoke had eaten into their eyes. There was nothing in their surrounding to reward them for the apparently inconceivable and fearsome job that was theirs to do at the decisive moment. The spring rains were continuous, Nikolai's wet clothing would not dry on him but this did not arouse anybody's sympathy. The soldiers were face to face with death but seemed to be completely indifferent to each other. The officers and NCO's issued orders in loud, sharp tones, and shouted and cursed at the men. The platoon sergeant seemed to have it in for Nikolai when he dragged along, exhausted, in the column. His fellow-soldiers didn't seem a bit interested in the fact that Nikolai Ulanov was about to lay down for his country the only life he had.

Nikolai soon tired of standing against the tree, sat down on the wet ground and dozed off, only to awaken in the bitter cold. Stretching his stiffened limbs, he began to wonder how long he had slept and how much time was left before the battle began.

"...I'm a lucky man, I've nothing

to complain of," he heard Dvoyeglazov's voice. "I've lived as happily with my wife for eight years as I did on the first day. . . ."

"My wife was crying when I left her with the kids," muttered Kulagin and then, for some unknown reason, laughed.

"What's your trade?" asked Dvoyeglazov.

"I make felt boots and I can tan sheepskins. . . I belong to a cooperative. . . ."

"Not so bad, you can make good money. . ." said the first soldier approvingly.

"We had enough when I was at home. . . ."

"When I left, my wife cried too," said Dvoyeglazov. "'You come back alive, that's all. . .'I don't want any medals.' 'Why don't you want medals?' I asked her. 'If you come back a hero, you won't want me and the kids any more,' 'That can't happen,' I explained to her. 'Oh, yes, it can,' she said. 'Because heroes always want to marry young girls . . .' I laughed at her. 'You're just thinking up trouble for yourself,' I said. 'Nothing of the sort,' she answered, 'they all run after the heroes with medals.'"

"You chaps won't leave me if anything happens, will you?" asked Ryabyshev.

"After the war there'll be a lot of construction everywhere. There'll be monuments in all the towns. I'm a moulder in plaster by trade and there'll be a big demand for my work. I'll dress my wife in silk, and the girls, too. . . I've got two of them. . . ."

"Too bad if you spoil them," said Kulagin.

"Why shouldn't I spoil them, if we win the war?"

"I say, you fellows. . . This is the first time for me. I'm asking you again. Don't leave me, if anything . . ." muttered Ryabyshev.

"I want to see the Germans. . . I want to get at them. . . I'll tell 'em something, from my wife and from myself," said Kulagin.

As is usual before a battle the men did not listen to each other.. Every one of them wanted somebody to talk to. However, there was such fierce hatred in Kulagin's last words that they all kept silent for a moment.

"How will you talk to them, they don't understand our language?" asked Dvoyeglazov.

"That doesn't matter, they would understand Kulagin," said Kolechkin gravely.

From the direction of the German lines came the sudden rattle of a machine gun, followed by a few straggling rifle shots. Another machine gun, somewhere nearer, got into action.

"It's beginning," said Kolechkin.

The branches of the trees formed a network pattern against the lighter sky The men rose to their feet, taken unawares by that which they had been expecting for so long. They were in a dense clump of fir trees at the foot of a hill, and could not see what was going on beyond the edge of the grove. Over their heads there was a red, then a greenish light, followed again by a red glow. The rockets lit up the upturned faces of the men like lightning. Ryabyshev covered his eyes with his left arm, like a child.

"They're letting off rockets, haven't you ever seen them before?" said Dvoyeglazov. Ryabyshev looked up at him with shining eyes.

"Stay near me," Dvoyeglazov advised him. "If I run, you keep behind me, when I shoot, you shoot, and when I lie down, get down beside me."

The last of the rockets burst and died down, and the waiting men realized that dawn was breaking. The section commanders led their men up to the top of the hill. Their boots slipped on the wet fir needles, and once or twice Ulanov kept his balance by holding on to the prickly branches.

He felt the icy water trickle down his back. He lifted his body slightly from the ground so as to get into a better position and saw beside him Kolechkin, the ex-airman. He was crawling through the mud, smiling awkwardly like a man who finds himself in a position unbecoming to his years. Kolechkin crawled as far as the last tree, lifted his head and looked round. Ulanov crawled after him.

Behind them the guns were firing and invisible shells were racing across the sky overhead. The thunder of the guns lasted a few minutes, and then Nikolai saw the men on his right stand up and run forward. He did not hear the orders but he, too, rose and ran forward. He found himself in the open and shivered as one does from the cold. Then he howled loudly like a baby that is being bathed,

choking with fear and ecstasy. An impulse stronger than will power drove Nikolai forward. His boots weighed a ton, and with blind fury he kept dragging one after the other out of the clinging slime. It was as if something entangled his feet, and he concentrated his whole energy on freeing himself from the fetters. Sometimes it seemed that he had got himself free of the earth but the next moment the hopeless struggle began anew... His feet sank in above the ankles and seemed to be held in a strong grip. Nikolai felt that he could not move any farther. The despair that swept over him at that moment was as great as if he were experiencing his own death. He tore himself out of the mud again, fell onto his knees, and saved himself from falling flat in the mud by leaning on his hands. He remained in that position for a few moments with his mouth open, sucking in great gulps of air, his heart beating frantically... Not far away he could see men crawling towards him. They appeared from somewhere on the flank and had crawled forward some distance on all fours, resembling sheep waddling in the mud. Without understanding what was happening, Ulanov saw one of them pitch forward and bury his helmet in the mud. He lay there and his legs continued to twitch but his head did not move.

"Lie down!" Nikolai heard somebody shout, but did not realize that the order applied to him. Nevertheless, he crawled forward with the others, without asking where they were all hurrying to. Everything around him was cracking and rumbling as though a hammer was beating on sheet iron. Ulanov was shaken by a blast, lumps of mud fell on his greatcoat, and he screwed up his eyes and shielded himself with his arms. When they were no more than ten paces from the edge of the grove towards which they were crawling, Nikolai suddenly got the impression that he was returning to the starting point. And then, as though made visible by the light of the dawn, the wet and terrible field, dotted with mines and swept by machine-gun fire, was taken in by his consciousness. He saw a man who had been wounded in the shoulder, crawling on his side and using one hand to drag himself along. Four fountains of mud burst from the ground simultaneously, and Nikolai hurried to reach the grove. His elbow struck sharply against somebody. He looked up and saw Kulagin.

"So that's how you chase the Germans!" Kulagin shouted and like Ulanov was working spasmodically with his elbows and knees; his face, covered in mud, looked like a monstrous mask.

"All right!" shouted Nikolai, "you'll see."

"Saving your skin, hero!" Kulagin cursed him as he pulled himself forward with his strong arms.

"All right, you'll see," shouted Nikolai, crawling side by side with Kulagin.

"You're advancing backwards, you fool," said Kulagin. The soldier cursed at great length, unleashing on Nikolai all the ferocity that had found no outlet.

The NCO's got their men together under the trees. Ulanov tried to stand but his legs gave way under him and he sat down. Kolechkin used a twig to brush the mud from his clothes, looking at them with obvious disgust. A short, bearded lieutenant ran past, a revolver in his hand. He was the company commander.

The leaves under the tree where Ulanov was sitting were stained with blood. Pieces of blood-stained lint and gauze were scattered all round the tree. This had obviously been a dressing station. "So that was an attack?" thought Nikolai. "And I am still alive?"

A few minutes later, the company commander ordered him to report to battalion headquarters for duty as runner. The sergeant who guided him through the trees told him that a chance mine had killed two men serving at headquarters.

Masha Ryzhova hoped to return to the regiment she had served in before she was wounded. Somebody, however, had taken her place and she was sent to a medical battalion in reserve. When she reached the battalion and found old friends there, she was pacified to some extent. At the hospital she had received several letters from her old company commander, Senior Lieutenant Gorbunov. These were the first love letters ever addressed to her, and not knowing quite what to do under the circumstances she was anxious for advice.

It was already dark, when Anya Manevich and Klava Golikova, nurses who had joined the army together with Masha,

chanced upon her and took her to their quarters.

Golikova put her arms round Ryzhova.

"Alive and well!" she shouted, and kept hugging her.

"Take your coat off, M-m-masha," said Anya. She stuttered, and being ashamed of it, usually spoke little.

Masha slowly pulled her hat off.

"They cut your hair!" whispered Golikova in horror.

"They did it in hospital, when I was unconscious," Masha cast an enquiring glance at her friends, trying to judge from their expressions the real extent of her misfortune.

"And you had such curls!" began Klava.

"It b-b-becomes you," said Anya seriously, raising her eyebrows that stood out sharply on her pale, beautiful face.

"It doesn't matter whether it becomes her or not. As long as it's convenient..." Masha, hearing a strange voice turned round and saw a girl sitting on a bench in the corner.

"Dusya Maximova," said the girl coming towards them and holding out her hand to Ryzhova.

"It'll soon grow again," said Golikova, soothingly, "and in the meantime you'll wear a kerchief."

Masha took off her tunic and while she was washing in a corner, the others got supper ready. Anya opened a tin of canned meat she had been saving up for a special occasion, Golikova broke up sugar with a German bayonet. While Masha was drying herself the girls asked her about life in the hospital. On the way here Masha had been anticipating her friends' amazement at seeing the letters from the battalion commander who was famous throughout the division, but the presence of the new nurse prevented her from bringing up the subject.

Masha was wearing a blue silk chemise with ribbons for shoulder straps; it was tucked into the waistband of a pair of soldier's quilted breeches.

"Oh, what a beautiful slip," exclaimed Golikova.

"I didn't want to leave it at home," explained Masha in confusion.

Klava and Anya examined the chemise, touched and stroked its smooth, slippery folds... The girls were not envious; their serious faces merely showed the curiosity of connoisseurs.

"Beautiful," said Klava with conviction.

"I'm a bit ashamed of it," admitted Masha. She went back to the corner to get her tunic, the iron tips on her boots making a clatter on the floor.

"Why ashamed?" Maximova who had been sitting quietly apart from the others suddenly joined the conversation.

"I've come to the front, not to a rest home...."

"Nonsense," said Maximova. "Silk underclothes are the most hygienic."

"Masha, I've got a surprise for you," shouted Klava gleefully. She dragged out her valise and begun rummaging in it.

"We've had gift parcels sent us several times," she said rapidly. "I've collected seven toothbrushes... I had to throw some away... And over a dozen handkerchiefs ... lace ones, embroidered "To a dear soldier friend", "To a Defender of the Country."

"For New Year they gave us real women's presents," began Klava again. "We ate the sweets up at once and now the Eau-de-Cologne is finished...."

She knelt down on the floor in front of her valise and her blond hair fell in heavy tresses over her face leaving a smooth neck bare.

"Here they are, found them at last!" exclaimed the girl waving a pair of long thin silk stockings in the air. She threw them over to Masha.

"Real silk!" said the astonished Masha as she pushed her hand into one of them and showed the others the fine transparent fabric.

"Lovely stockings," stammered Anya.

"They're for you, Masha," shouted Klava Golikova pleased at her own generosity.

"You're crazy," said Masha drawing her fingers slowly out of the stocking.

"Then you'll be all in silk," said Klava gleefully.

"I wouldn't think of taking them from you, you got them as a present...."

"Very impractical under our conditions," put in Dusya Maximova.

"But very hygienic," exclaimed Klava mockingly.

The girls sat down at the table. Masha added a half bottle of port wine and a box of chocolates to the feast. She uncorked the wine and poured it into tin

cups, careful that each of them got an equal share.

"That's too much for me," said Anya.

"Just for once it won't hurt you," decided Klava.

"To victory, girls," said Masha loudly.

The girls immediately became serious, clinked cups and took a sip of the wine.

"Good stuff," said Klava.

"I wanted to get Kagor but I couldn't find any," said Masha importantly.

Masha kept wishing all the time that Dusya Maximova, the stranger, would go, but as soon as the supper was over, Dusya came and sat beside her and started asking her what Moscow looked like.

"It's changed a bit."

"Is there much damage?"

"No, it's hardly noticeable. The big shop windows are all boarded up and sandbagged. There are barricades and pillboxes on the Leningrad Highway."

"On Leningrad Highway?" exclaimed Klava.

"Yes, and Moscow University was bombed. There are fewer people in the streets and the houses are very uninviting. At night there isn't a glimmer of light anywhere."

The girls kept up the conversation for some time. All of them wanted to get posted from the Medical Battalion to a unit at the front. Anya smilingly informed them that she had already been promised a place in one of the battalions in the line.

Masha again thought of Gorbunov's love for her, and the very idea of it made her feel warm all over. It was not so much that she was devoted to the man—it was a new and pleasant feeling for her to know that she was being loved. She felt that a swift-flowing stream of events was carrying her along, fascinating people, courageous deeds, pure impulses... The danger lurking everywhere aroused in her a sharper awareness of life. Even the trying daily chores now seemed to Masha to be filled with the charm of the unusual.

At last Maximova got up and left the room. Masha followed her with burning eyes.

"Oh, girls," she began. "If you only knew..." Hearing footsteps returning from outside, she stopped. Dusya, broad-shouldered, stolidly built, came in carrying an armful of straw.

It was time to settle down for the night and the girls got up from the table. Anya Manevich spread her groundsheet over some straw and rejoined her friends. The girls took each other by the hands and stood still for a few moments, as though bidding farewell to the evening that had been so good.

"A pity we didn't sing to-night," said Klava.

Sitting on the crackling straw the girls pulled off their boots and their tunics. They had only one blanket between them, so they spread it right across and covered their feet with their greatcoats.

"It's hard to believe that I'm back again with you," said Masha. She was lying between Klava and Anya.

"And I'm glad you're back," said Klava, drawing Masha's head onto her soft round shoulder.

Soon they heard Maximova's regular breathing. She lay on the very outside of the patch of straw that was their common bed and seemed to have fallen asleep.

"D'you know, I've learned to fire a machine gun!" said Klava.

"I don't believe you," answered Masha.

"Captain Gromov taught me...."

"What Captain Gromov?..."

"Oh, you don't know him, a gunner."

Klava sat up, tucked her legs up under her, glanced towards the sleeping Maximova, then bent down close to Ryzhova and said in a faint whisper.

"He proposed to me yesterday...."

"Proposed?" asked Masha after a slight pause. Her own news seemed to have been forestalled, and this cut her to the quick.

"Well, he didn't exactly propose, but he let me know that's what he meant," whispered Golikova. In the semi-darkness her eyes seemed enormous.

"How did he let you know?"

"In every way. He said his head was in a whirl when I stood near him. He spoke about my hands and my hair."

"And what did you do?" asked Masha with interest.

"He wanted to put his arms round me but I slapped his hands."

"Is that all?"

"Later he did get his arms round me... We were standing in the outside

room. . . It was dark there. . . He kissed me. . . Then I broke away from him and fled. . . ."

"He's no good, that Gromov of yours," said Masha.

Golikova did not answer immediately. She could not understand why things that had given her so much pleasure should not please her closest friend.

"What's wrong with his liking me?" she asked at length.

"It's wrong even to think of such things at times like these," said Masha. She got a sort of vengeful satisfaction out of saying this to the friend who had got her tidings in before hers.

"D-dd-d'you want to m-m-marry him?" asked Anya drawing closer to Klava.

"No. . . I'm not going to . . ." answered Klava weakly.

"Then what d-d-do you think? J-j-j-. . ." Anya was excited and had to wait until she felt she could speak clearly. "J-just like that?"

"Never," said Golikova in a scared voice.

"Get it out of your head, Klava," whispered Masha. "We didn't come here for romances. . . When the war's over, you can kiss as much as you like."

Klava lowered her head and dug her finger into the blanket.

"It's easy for you to talk when nobody makes up to you," she said in a humble voice.

"Why do you think nobody does?" asked Masha, unable to contain herself.

"Who?" breathed Golikova.

"I didn't intend to tell you," said Masha who no longer felt any particular desire to share her news with them.

"I tell you everything and you are holding back," said Klava indignantly.

"D'you know Senior Lieutenant Gorbunov?" said Masha very softly.

"Who doesn't know him?"

"Simply showered me with letters. . . ."

She ran barefoot across the floor and took a bundle of letters from her tunic pocket.

"At first he was only interested in my health but before I left hospital I got this from him. Just listen: 'Don't be surprised at this letter. Perhaps we shall not meet again so soon. But in a year, two or three I shall come looking for you. I want you to wait for me, at least a little while. . . .'

"'My darling,'" she continued, "'forgive me for calling you that. Perhaps I fell in love with you after you had gone. No, that's not it. I've only now realized what had happened a long time ago. Masha, do you remember that frosty night when you and I fought off the Jerries in the ruins of a school? It was then, when splinters were whistling round us, that I realized how dear you were to me. I have only one idea in mind as I write this letter—don't forget me! However long the war may last—one, two, or three years, I shall continue reminding you of my existence. . . .'"

Masha deliberately read with an expressionless voice to show her complete indifference. She broke off suddenly.

"There's a lot more along the same lines," she said.

"He writes well," said Klava.

"Sentimentality. I didn't expect it from a fighting man like he."

"Read some more, read some more," insisted Klava.

Masha read a few more lines and then broke off again. These words were meant for her alone, and she felt it wasn't right to let the other girls hear them.

"I'm glad now that I wasn't posted back to the regiment," she said. "I'd be meeting him too often. . . That's no good."

"Don't you love him?" asked the astonished Klava.

"Of course not," answered Masha, although now she was not too sure of it.

She crawled back under the blanket. The others kept still and they soon fell asleep.

The girls were awakened when it was scarcely dawn. A large party of wounded had been brought from the front and Masha ran to the reception room.

She took in the wounded lying on benches and on the floor, and then went to look for the assistant surgeon. Orderlies carried past her a stretcher on which lay a man covered with a greatcoat right up to his head. All she could see of him was his hair, and that was clammy from rain or sweat. One hand hung down almost to the floor, covered in dried mud. On the collar of the greatcoat Masha could see the insignia of a senior lieutenant. Without thinking of what she was doing Masha dashed over to the stretcher. The orderlies placed it on the floor and she bent

over the wounded officer. She lifted his heavy, lifeless arm and placed it along the stretcher. Then she carefully lifted the corner of the coat. She saw a bluish-grey face with half closed eyes.

"Not him!" she almost shouted, carefully put the coat back and went away.

On the eve of the battle the Army Commander talked by phone to his Divisional Generals. They all reported that preparations for the offensive had been completed or would be completed by dawn. He wished each of them success but was not absolutely sure that some of them had done as they said. Officers were, therefore, dispatched immediately to divisional headquarters. Brigade Commissar Umanets, member of the Army Military Council had been touring the divisions since morning. At night he phoned that the whole army was ready for action but said that the unfavorable weather gave occasion for some alarm as to the outcome of the operation. The Army Commander, however, confirmed the order for the offensive. It was already late and he dismissed his Chief of Staff with whom he had been working all evening. As he was leaving, the Major General shook hands with the GOC, and the handshake was longer than was customary.

At dawn the GOC launched the offensive to the preparation of which he had devoted his entire energy for the past few weeks. Although the objective was the capture of a few points to facilitate later offensive operations, Ryabinin was experiencing an unusual excitement which he carefully concealed from everybody. Within a few hours he would be attacking with large forces through spring floods, something that nobody had ever before been able to accomplish. At Front Headquarters many were in doubt, not as regards the operation itself, but as regards the time chosen. However, the intentions of Supreme Headquarters which had issued the order for the offensive, were well understood by the general.

The GOC noticed a post card lying on top of a pile of newspapers and with a little flutter the GOC remembered that it ought to have been answered. It was from his sister whom he had not seen for many years. . . The general, however, had grown accustomed to answering nothing but official papers, inquiries and reports. . . He was a widower, had no children and had lost contact with the friends of his youth. He got a sheet of clean paper in the desk drawer, and sat staring at it thoughtfully for some time, not knowing how to begin. It was not without difficulty that he wrote a short communication to the effect that he was well, that spring had come and the snow was melting in the fields. He thought a little and then asked his sister not to worry about him and enquired about the health of his niece whom he had never seen. He almost signed his full name in the same way as he signed orders. Stumblingly he wrote: "Your brother, Seryozha."

The wind-driven rain beat faintly but persistently against the blacked-out window. "It's still pouring, curse it!" thought the GOC, listening intently. He wrote the address on the envelope, and with a feeling of relief pushed the letter aside.

The GOC sat down on the edge of his bed and began to undress. He disliked his aging body which was beginning to make itself felt, and when that body was uncovered he tried hard not to look at the bulging stomach and the grey hair on his chest that looked like a mass of grass in soapsuds. He stretched himself out under the blanket and for a moment experienced the pleasure of physical repose. Drip . . . drip . . . drip! He listened to the light, incessant patter of the rain.

He opened his eyes at five o'clock sharp, just as he intended and lay for a few moments in bed.

The general dressed himself, threw his greatcoat over his shoulders and went out into the garden of the house. Dawn was breaking; the tiny leafless apple trees with their crooked branches were huddled in the damp air. The GOC followed the wet path as far as the low fence. The garden stood on the edge of a height, and from the gate he could see dimly the flooded road that wound round the hill—three tractors were fussing along, dragging long-barrelled guns. The GOC looked down at them. The engines roared and panted,and crimson flames poured out of their exhaust pipes. Scarcely perceptible, men slipped and slid along the edges of the road and disappeared into the gloom. The tractors also disappeared one after the other. The general raised

his head and looked intently after them. In the colourless watery gloom a pinkish light flickered up and died down again, and the roar of the overheated engines could be heard for a long time. The GOC stared toward the west, as though he were trying to take in the whole of his army, tens of thousands of men, countless guns and machines concentrated in the darkness.

"This weather will finish me off," he thought, and his immobile face became harsher.

At seven a. m. the GOC attacked simultaneously in several directions, none of which, incidentally, was the decisive one. The main drive was scheduled for a later hour, after the Germans had brought their reserves into battle. On each of the sectors, therefore, it was essential to push relentlessly, in order to deceive the enemy. Reports started coming in soon saying that the attacking units were making practically no progress. The Germans were taken by surprise but the mud prevented the attacking force from taking advantage of it, and enemy resistance mounted in strength. The general phoned Colonel Bogdanov. The colonel reported that Gorbunov's battalion had been driven back but was renewing the attack. The Germans had apparently been completely deceived as they concentrated heavy fire power on that sector.

"Will your Gorbunov hold out?" asked the general.

"As long as he lives, he will," answered Bogdanov.

- "Get on to Gorbunov," continued the GOC, "and tell him I order him to go on with the job. . . ."

Senior Lieutenant Gorbunov and Battalion Commissar Lukin were lying at the edge of the wood. German mortar shells were falling behind them: sometimes the explosions were quite near, now they were drawing farther away. Nearby axes chopped away at trees, and they kept crashing down. The gunners were cutting a road through the woods for their guns, and Gorbunov was waiting until they were brought into a position from which they could fire over open sights. He looked at the wet field pitted here and there with shell holes. He could see the German defences through the misty air—the long, low fence of barbed wire entanglements.

"Vladimir Mikhailovich!" shouted Gorbunov. "We'd have been over there were it not for this blasted mud!"

"Of course!" answered Lukin, a tall, thin officer in glasses which he frequently wiped with his finger, without removing them.

"Just because of that blasted slush we didn't make it. . . What rot! . . ."

He had really done everything to make a success out of something that never had a chance. Major Nikolayevsky and he had selected the right time for the attack, had properly arranged artillery cooperation which, by the way, was far from sufficient, had ensured mortar cover, and planned the deployment of the troops. . . While preparing this hopeless battle Gorbunov began to believe in a miraculous outcome, not because the relation of forces had changed but because it was the only way he could direct the battle. The lieutenant evoked life-saving phrases such as: "There is such a thing as blind luck," "Enough to make the devil laugh," or "Suppose it does come off, after all!" Sometimes when he looked at his men who, he knew, trusted him implicitly, he felt a real alarm. Without any special effort, however, he succeeded in keeping himself from thinking of what had caused that alarm. At the very outset of the operation the lieutenant experienced a sort of frenzied impatience like that of a card player who has bet more on a card than he could meet. Fate seemed to smile at Gorbunov. His attack took the Germans by surprise. But the men got stuck in the cloying mud and the only chance for success—the rapid capture of the fire area—was lost. Now the lieutenant was about to repeat the attack as ordered, but this time he couldn't even count on the surprise effect.

"I will go with Company No. 3," said Lukin rising to his knees.

"Go ahead," answered Gorbunov. "Half the men in that company come from those damned reinforcements."

"I'll go with them," repeated Lukin.

"Excellent!"

"The men need encouraging, they haven't been under fire before," said the commissar.

He was a man of over forty but his slim figure, his abrupt manner and protruding ears had something about them that made him seem much younger.

Lukin hung back; he wanted to say goodbye but Gorbunov had already turned his attention to the noise behind him among the trees. The bright green guns were coming up.

"Over here, over here," he shouted to the gunners. "Now we'll give them hell."

"And what the devil am I supposed to do with three toy guns," he thought to himself.

"All right, I'm off," said Lukin.

"Good," shouted Gorbunov and went to meet the gunners. The commissar, his head bent low, ran off into the wood. The battery of light guns got into position at the edge of the wood. Staggering and stumbling the gunners brought up wooden boxes of shells. Suddenly it darkened as though evening were drawing on. Heavy rain began to fall and the woods were filled with the patter of countless drops of water.

"Prepare reserve gun positions," said the lieutenant to the artillery commander. "You won't be able to stay in one place."

The gunner officer nodded and the raindrops bounced from his groundsheet in all directions.

"Sysoyev, Mikhailov, join me over here," called the gunner officer. His thick moustache was soaking wet and hung down over his lips. "Hellish weather, by Christ. . . ."

"Hell's own weather," agreed Gorbunov with seeming satisfaction. "But not too bad, it isn't hot. . ." He looked at his watch, suddenly remembered Lukin, and looked round expecting to see the commissar. "I should have said 'Goodbye' to him," he thought, reproaching himself, but soon forgot Lukin. He hurried to his headquarters, as there were only a few minutes left before the attack was to begin. Gorbunov did not think about the possibility of his being killed—he simply had no time for it.

Ulanov was sitting at the telephone beside the signalmen. He was drenched to the skin and chilled with cold but, strangely enough, the physical torment made him less sensitive to the horror of the battle. Mortar bombs were bursting close by, and when he shivered it was not from apprehension but from the cold water trickling down his back. He sniffed, sucked his lips and tried to fight the icy chill. Busy with this losing battle, Nikolai again did not notice how the attack began. He looked at Gorbunov who walked calmly between the trees, giving orders in a loud voice. This extraordinary man who apparently was immune to fear or pain made Nikolai still more humiliated with his own helplessness. He shrank into himself, lowered his eyes and hoped to remain unnoticed. Suddenly the senior lieutenant sent for him, and Ulanov stood to attention before Gorbunov, as though waiting to hear his own death sentence.

The Germans had brought flanking machine guns to bear on the attacking troops and Gorbunov reported it to the artillery officer. As he gave Ulanov the damp paper with the message written in indelible pencil, Gorbunov glanced at his new runner. The boy was pale, his hazel eyes were shining, drops of rain trembled on the clean, youthful chin.

"Deliver this as quickly as you can," said Gorbunov. "Where did he come from?" he thought, and for a fleeting second he experienced a warm feeling for the lad.

"Yes, Comrade Lieutenant," answered Ulanov in a choking voice. He ran off, glad that his fear had been unnoticed and that nobody knew how really worthless he was.

A runner from the political instructor of Company No. 1 approached Gorbunov. A splinter had scratched his forehead, and the blood had got into his eyes but he wiped it off with the back of his hand the way one wipes off sweat. He shook the red drops off his hand onto the ground, took a deep breath and shouted, as though he were addressing a deaf man, that more than half the company had been wiped out, and that those who were left were pinned to the ground and would not get up. . . .

"Where's your officer?" asked Gorbunov.

"Killed," shouted the soldier. He turned his head away and spat blood.

"You mean Lieutenant Martynov?" asked the battalion commander, not believing him.

"The lieutenant's been killed," shouted the runner.

At that moment a signalman told Gorbunov that the C. O. of the Regiment wanted him on the telephone. "Martynov . . . Martynov . . ." muttered Gorbunov as he ran to the telephone. "My old pal, never been wounded. . . And

now killed at the very start of the battle." Gorbunov took the receiver and suddenly heard a faint, distant whisper. Major Nikolayevsky was asking why the battalion had not made any progress.

"Comrade Major!" said Gorbunov. "Martynov's been killed," he wanted to say but took hold of himself. "Here is the situation: the men are up to their knees in mud. There have been heavy losses in the companies... I have brought the guns out to fire open sight."

"The GOC orders you to finish the thing off," he heard indistinctly.

"What?" he shouted, not understanding the major.

"You have to finish the job, you must!" came the distant shout.

"I understand..." said Gorbunov and put down the receiver.

He did not say it to himself in so many words but he felt that nobody would come to his assistance. He and his battalion were already separated from the rest of the world and were going along their own road the end of which was apparently quite close. An almost childish feeling of having been offended suddenly came to his aid.

"So, that's what you do to me," he said addressing himself to implacable fate. "Good and well... I'll try again... We'll see how it all works out in the end..." He called the wounded runner and began to question him in detail.

It was approaching midday but no change in the situation took place. No. 2 Company was hopelessly stuck in the mud. No. 3 Company led by Lukin, was given reinforcements and was closer to the German wire than any of the others. Even this company, however, was held up in a gully. No. 1 Company had to withdraw to its starting point. Gorbunov formed a platoon out of the men left from this company, and sent them to reinforce Lukin. With the same objective, he changed the gun positions. To Lukin he sent a brief message: "Vladimir Mikhailovich, you've practically made it. Try once more. I've sent over to help you all the men I have. I shall cover your advance."

Ulanov delivered several messages for the battalion commander and began to feel that he was needed in this battle. In gratitude for this new feeling he watched Gorbunov's every move, ready to go anywhere at the first bidding. Warmed up and his attention distracted from himself he began to suffer less from the wet and cold. He gradually began to understand what was going on around him. The efforts that had seemed chaotic, now emerged as directed toward a single purpose and he was as astounded as though he had never expected it.

The rain moved away to the west but the wood grew dark again. A heavy blue-black cloud covering half the sky was moving up from the east. The white trunks of the birches stood out all the more clearly against its background. Kneeling beside a tree Gorbunov watched the battle through his field glasses. Ulanov was sitting a few paces from him. He could see the men a long way ahead, crawling slowly over the ground. They were very indistinct being only a little bit lighter than the mud. Nikolai realized that this was the composite platoon on its way to reinforce No. 3 Company. Anxiously awaiting even the tiniest event he began to feel sorry that the battle was not developing fast enough.

The men out in the open field began to disappear somewhere... Nikolai guessed that they were entering the gully where Lukin and his men were waiting for them. Several showers of mud leaped up over their unseen positions. A second or two later the dull sound of the explosions reached him. The fountains of mud began filling the air almost continuously and the explosions merged into a single long rumble. "Curtain fire," Nikolai thought and smiled unconsciously, like a man who has just learned to read. He was surprised to hear Gorbunov's savage voice.

"Number six! Give me Number six!" shouted Gorbunov. Standing over the signalman, he looked enormous with his bared chest, his groundsheet blown by the wind, and his wet steel helmet glistening dully. Gorbunov grasped with both hands the submachine gun hanging across his chest, as though he were trying to wrench it off its sling. The signalman called the exchange in a loud voice and then looked up timidly at the commander.

"Disconnection," he shouted suddenly with despair, and again began calling the exchange loudly.

A strange expression crept over the weatherbeaten face of the senior lieutenant. Ulanov thought that Gorbunov wanted to say something but seemed to

have lost his voice. "Something's happened," thought Ulanov, and worried not about himself or his comrades, but about his battalion commander.

Gorbunov ordered the signalman to get out and find the break, wrote a few words on a page of his notebook, tore it out and called Ulanov.

"Can you run fast?" he asked, and his grey, stern eyes peered at Ulanov from under his helmet.

"Yes, Comrade Senior. . . ."

"Run as fast as you can," the lieutenant interrupted him, "deliver this report to the C. O. Tell him I want more fire. . . Fire!" he repeated putting special emphasis on the word. "Run along the telephone line, you'll find your way quicker."

Ulanov ran out of the wood into an open field. The telephone cable coiled along the ground where patches of new green grass could be seen here and there: the lower parts of the ground were filled with pools of water. Suddenly yellow flames came bursting from an isolated bush ahead of him. The bush flew up into the air and fell apart into broken branches. These were the mortar shells that Nikolai had been listening to all morning. He was no longer scared of explosions. He was hurrying along on important business and the paper hidden safely in his tunic pocket seemed to make him invulnerable. Nikolai ran a few paces forward and then dropped quickly to the ground as he heard the growing whine of a shell. It burst behind him and, as he looked back, Nikolai saw a dark cloud at the edge of the wood. He jumped up and rushed forward in another spurt. He reached a small reddish hummock and again dropped to the ground. "Just in time," he thought feeling the air press against his face, pleased with himself at having escaped whoever it was that was chasing him. Bending low he dashed forward to a lightish patch about twenty paces ahead and dropped to the ground again. The patch turned out to be a brand new aluminium mess tin full of rain water.

Mortar shells kept bursting frequently all over the field, and Ulanov sometimes had to drop to the ground before he'd reached his mark. Each dozen yards thus gained brought with them a fresh intoxication. As he heard the roar of the bursting bombs left and right he said to himself: "Miss." "Fell short." "Another miss," getting great satisfaction out of this recording of the shots. He felt himself to be playing with a powerful but blind enemy whose failures brought him the greater pleasure the more often they occurred. Nikolai began to tempt fate by choosing more distant objectives. He felt a strange joy rising within him: he had ceased to be afraid and experienced a feeling he had never known before, the triumph of absolute fearlessness. An astounding sense of freedom, lightness, strength carried Nikolai forward. He ran towards a long flat hill as though he were on wings. A soldier was sitting at the foot of the hill and Nikolai stopped. . . He recognized the signalman who had left before him.

"So here you are," said the signalman, "take my tools. . . ."

"What's the matter?" asked Ulanov, not understanding in the excitement of the game he was playing.

"You can see for yourself," answered the signalman. He was hunched up, his hands pressed against his stomach, and between his fingers Nikolai now saw a dark wet stain on the greatcoat.

"Clean the ends of the wire till they shine," continued the signalman, "then twist them together and wrap the insulation tape round them. It's easy enough."

"Let me help you along," said Ulanov, trying not to look at the place the signalman was covering up with his hands.

"You've got to work fast and not waste time on me. . . The break's farther along."

"I'll come back . . . in a minute . . ." said Ulanov. He felt pity for the wounded man and a vague sense of superiority, as though that which happened to the signalman could have never happened to him.

"You'll find me here," said the signalman in a tired voice.

Ulanov took his toolbag and ran forward with a mixed feeling of inexplicable shame and relief.

He had to deliver his message as soon as possible and hurried, but now he was unable to keep his eyes off the wire and was worried about the delay it caused. On second thought, the repair of the telephone line was undoubtedly of equal importance. Ulanov stumbled along, feeling the thump of his rifle on his back.

His boots slipped on the wet grass. A sudden pain brought Nikolai down and the toolbag dropped beside him. He rose, stepped out with the foot that had given way, cried out in pain and fell to the ground.

"That same ankle again," thought Nikolai. He could walk no longer. He crawled on his right side, pushing himself along with his elbows and trying to keep his injured foot from further damage. With every chance knock or awkward movement he groaned in pain. It had begun to rain again and Nikolai was alone in this huge, wet field. Sometimes he was in water up to his chin and fumbled with his hands so as not to lose the wire. He crawled about thirty yards and began to weaken.

"A hell of a business," he muttered, afraid that he might not be able to deliver the message.

"Never mind, never mind, Kolya! One more try, just one more!" he said aloud. His own voice, encouraging and friendly, gave him strength.

"Just a little more, only a little," Nikolai kept repeating, pleading with himself.

Nikolai's hands sunk into the liquid earth, the water washed over his face and filled his mouth. The roll of wire kept catching on things and impeding his progress.

"Keep going," repeated Nikolai. "Keep going." He no longer had breath enough to speak but his lips formed the words. He had a very poor idea of what was going on around him, for all his strength was concentrated on one and the same tormenting movement; he had to push his right elbow forward, pull himself up with the aid of his left hand, and then once more dig his right elbow into the mud. For several minutes on end, Nikolai would forget the reason for his efforts but even then his eyes would be glued to the thin black cable.

When he eventually came to the break, Nikolai was far too exhausted to rejoice.

"Oh hell," whispered Nikolai looking at the burnt end of the cable sticking up from the mud. He tried to get hold of it but it kept slipping out of his benumbed fingers.

"Hell," he cursed again and bound the cable round his left wrist so that it would not slip out again. Then he fumbled round and round to find the other end thrown some distance away by the explosion that broke the wire. He found it in a pool of water and lay still for two or three minutes, resting. He got the knife out of the toolbag and remembered that the signalman had told him to clean the ends till they shined. Nikolai's fingers had no strength left in them, and he could not make the knife scrape away the insulation. Several times he dropped the knife.

"Oh hell," he groaned. Mad at his helplessness, he placed the end of the cable in his mouth and chewed off the insulation. In the same fashion he bared the second wire. He finally joined the two ends, insulated them and lay down to rest.

The rain slackened off but it made no difference whatsoever to Ulanov. Every yard of progress now was paid for by unbearable agony. The pain in his ankle spread over the whole leg that he was dragging along the ground. More than anything else in the world he wanted to lay his head on the wet soil and rest. He had already reached the woods when two signalmen sent out by Major Nikolayevsky picked him up. They helped him to his feet, and Nikolai demanded that they take him immediately to headquarters. With their help he walked a few paces and suddenly stopped.

"There's a wounded signalman left out there. . . You better take care of him. . . ."

Tormented by the thought that he ought to have sent for the signalman earlier, he hurriedly explained where to find the man. One of the soldiers ran back to the field and the other dragged Nikolai along to HQ.

Hopping on one foot and supporting himself on the wet, boarded wall, Nikolai got down into the HQ dugout. Around a table that had its legs driven into the ground were several men, their feet invisible in the black water that covered the floor.

"What now?" asked one of the officers. His head formed a dark silhouette against the tiny window opposite the door. A long moustache dropped down the face hidden in shadow.

"A runner from Senior Lieutenant Gorbunov, Comrade Major," said the soldier who brought in Ulanov. Nikolai could not immediately find his voice: he

was too excited at having reached his destination.

"Give me the message," said the major in a low hoarse voice.

"Here it is," said Nikolai, leaning against the wall and unbuttoning his greatcoat. The coarse cloth was saturated with water and Nikolai's fingers would not obey him. The officers in the dugout waited in silence. . . .

"Oh hell," muttered Nikolai in despair.

The signalman helped him undo the hooks, and at last he pulled the wet paper out of his pocket. With great care, so as not to tear it, he handed the message to the major. The officer unfolded the message and the wet paper fell apart in his hands.

"The devil!" grunted the major in disappointment.

Laying out the pieces of paper on the palm of his hand he went over to the window.

"It's all washed away. . . I can't make out a word," said Nikolayevsky angrily.

Nikolai tried to move forward, as though to deny the major's statement. He staggered, put his weight on his injured foot and groaned.

"Speak up. How are things over there?" asked Nikolayevsky, putting the wet piece of paper on the table.

"Fire. . . Comrade Senior Lieutenant asks for more fire . . ." said Ulanov in a high-pitched voice.

"Fire?" asked the major staring at the lad.

"Yes, yes. . . To crush the heavy artillery."

"Too late, my boy," said Nikolayevsky.

"What?" whispered Ulanov.

"Too late, I tell you. Are you wounded? All right, you may go. . . ."

Outside the dugout the signalman who had brought Nikolai, gave him lengthy instructions on how to get to the dressing station. Nikolai, however, did not understand anything the man was saying, he was so frightened and depressed.

"Feeling bad?" asked the signalman. "I'll take you there."

He bent down offering his shoulder to Nikolai and took him by the waist. Nikolai put his arm round the signalman and they staggered off to the dressing station.

The telephone was working again and at last Gorbunov spoke to his C. O. In answer to the lieutenant's request, Nikolayevsky repeated the GOC's order—advance! The major could not promise any guns capable of crushing the German artillery.

The rain stopped and low grey clouds, moving from east to west, passed over the birches. Gorbunov left the telephone, asked for some hand grenades, hung them onto his belt, called all the runners together and ordered them to follow him. "That's all, I think?" he asked himself like a man about to set out on a long journey. He hesitated, trying to recall something, could not remember what it was and walked out of the wood.

The battalion commander had decided to get his men up from the ground and lead the attack personally. He himself was the last reserve he could send into battle. Everything else he had had at his disposal was already concentrated for the final effort. Had the lieutenant been told that the whole German army was facing him, he would have attacked just the same. But the strange feeling that he had forgotten something or left something undone would not leave Gorbunov. He did not realize that it was regret for a life he had not yet lived. . . To get men on their feet in face of the fire that was raging there now, even supposing any of them were left, seemed quite impossible.

Half way to the gully in which Lukin had taken cover, he noticed that the Germans were directing their fire farther back behind him. Apparently they had decided that the attacking party in the field had been wiped out. The roar of explosions now came from the wood he had just left. A sudden quiet reigned over the area ahead of him—the low, half-flooded field, as dark as the cloud that was sweeping westwards overhead. Gorbunov hurried on. He ran through the puddles and cold water splashed his face. If the Germans had been mistaken and his troops were still safe he would be able to attack. He was filled with a new hope, even if weak. True there was still the barbed wire and small arms fire but they seemed less terrible to him than the big guns. Gorbunov took this kindness of fate to be a good omen. "Hurry, hurry," he said to himself. "If I find anybody alive, we can still break

through... But I must hurry while the Germans are still not expecting another attack...."

There was deep water in the gully, and men, real live men, sitting in the water, holding their rifles up. Gorbunov jumped under cover, and the swift flowing water swirled round his legs. In the distance he noticed Lukin, and what he saw pleased and astonished him. The commissar had risen up out of the water and was holding a revolver in his outstretched hand. Looking round him with unseeing eyes—Lukin was not wearing his glasses—he fired his revolver.

"For your country! For Stalin! Forward!" he shouted in a voice Gorbunov never heard before, a voice that was high pitched and sharp.

"Good for you, my friend!" thought Gorbunov. His whole being was filled with gratitude. "He's getting the men up himself. Splendid fellow..." And Gorbunov rose to his full height.

"For your country! For Stalin!" he repeated.

Lukin heard him. He turned around and the battalion commander saw the astonished look on his face. In a moment they lost sight of each other. The constant firing deafened Gorbunov. The troops climbed out of the gully, and he ran to the attack with them, firing on the way. Suddenly he realized he was alone. About twenty yards to his left he could see isolated groups; somebody was crawling rapidly along the field far away to the right. Gorbunov looked behind him and saw men clinging to the ground some distance farther back.

"Get on your feet! Forward!" he shouted and stumbled over somebody lying in the water.

The soldier raised his head, exposing a fat face covered with mud.

"Get up!" the lieutenant shouted.

"I'm killed..." whispered Ryabyshev.

"I'll have you killed!" Gorbunov rasped out hoarsely.

"I'm killed... killed... killed..." the soldier kept repeating incoherently.

Kulagin and a few others were still crawling forward. Ryabyshev could not get himself off the ground and lay down with his eyes closed.

"If you don't get up, I'll shoot you myself," screamed Gorbunov. He staggered and felt a sharp blow in his chest. "I'm hit," he thought, and before he could feel fear he lost consciousness. He fell face down beside Ryabyshev, his body shook, and then lay still.

That evening Gorbunov was taken to the Medical Battalion. After the operation he was brought to a ward, a big classroom in the village school. For the time being, he was alone in the ward. The lieutenant lay on a stretcher near the wall and beside him, her arms wrapped round her knees, sat Masha Ryzhova, in a white smock and kerchief.

The big room was filled with two rows of stretchers standing close to each other, all covered with grey hospital blankets. The oil lamp with a paper shade that stood on the table did not light up much of the room. It was very quiet and the stillness was broken only by occasional footsteps in the corridor. The lieutenant lay motionless and Masha did not take her eyes off his face. It did not show any pain but looked immeasurably tired. His dark-skinned hands with their white fingernails lay helplessly on the blanket. The lieutenant had been unconscious for many hours and it seemed that he would never wake up. One of the two bullets that brought him down had inflicted a wound which could not be operated on without bringing about his death. Masha knew this and she sat listening to Gorbunov's difficult and irregular breathing. Without noticing it, from time to time, she'd begin to breathe in unison with him, and even held her breath for long intervals when there was a doubt whether Gorbunov would breathe again or not. Masha was greatly worried by the fact that she did not seem to have any deep feeling for him. Her unexpected outburst in the morning had left her with a kind of dull indifference and she received the news of Gorbunov's wound with relative calm. Her feelings when she found him in the school corridor were more astonishment and pity than real grief.

Gorbunov's temperature rose continuously. His face grew red and the blond beard that had grown during the past few days stuck out sharply on his burning cheeks. "What a pity," thought Masha, "he's so young still and see..." But she was much more sorry that the source of her secret pleasures had suddenly run dry, that there was nobody left now

to write such surprising letters and life would be all the poorer for it. "I'll volunteer as a scout," decided the girl, "or as a machine gunner. . . What do I want to hang behind the lines for?"

The door opened. Klava Golikova poked her head inside. She came in on tiptoes and put her arms round her friend.

"I told our commissar about everything," she said.

"What on earth for?" asked Masha in alarm.

"He gave you permission to attend to Gorbunov. . . ."

Masha did not answer and Golikova, peeved at the fact that the trouble she had taken did not meet with a warmer response, also held her peace. After a while she gave her own interpretation of her friend's silence.

"Don't you worry too much . . ." she whispered in Masha's ear, "perhaps he'll get better. I'm sure he'll pull through."

"Go away, Klava! Go away, please!" said Masha in a tiny little voice but with such emphasis that Klava was scared.

Masha's eyes were half closed and the light shadow of her eyelashes trembled on her cheeks.

"What's the matter with you?" asked Golikova.

Masha dropped her head but did not reply.

"Sorry!" said Golikova and left the room.

Masha looked at Gorbunov. His grey, shining eyes were open, looking straight up at the ceiling. Masha knelt down beside him and remained motionless in expectation.

Gorbunov studied the dark ceiling hidden in the shadows. It was so high it seemed to him that he was looking at a clouded evening sky. He turned his head slightly, and saw the wall—dark and empty like the ceiling, like a prison wall. Gorbunov lowered his eyes and saw the girl. He recognized her immediately. Without any sign of astonishment, as though everything was happening to him in a dream, he gave the girl a questioning glance.

"I . . ." he began and stopped, his cracked lips quivering. "Am I wounded?" he asked as though he were still not quite sure about it. He was unpleasantly surprised at his own voice, it was hardly audible and hoarse.

"Yes, lightly," answered the girl.

Gorbunov suddenly felt a lack of air in the room. His bony face took on a scared look.

"Masha?" he asked.

"Yes, it's me," answered the girl. Mechanically she put her hand up to adjust her kerchief, caught herself in the act and quickly lowered her hands.

"How did you get here?" asked the lieutenant.

"I've just come . . ." said Masha.

"And I . . . I didn't know . . ." Gorbunov closed his eyes for a second and then opened them again. He saw Masha, her oval face, her small, full-lipped mouth, her broad nose and her radiant eyes—they seemed brighter and bigger to Gorbunov because Masha had grown thinner.

"How's that . . . I didn't know," repeated Gorbunov, his hands wandering aimlessly over the blanket.

"Be quiet. . . You mustn't talk," said Masha.

"Have you been back long?" asked the lieutenant.

"Three days already . . ." answered Masha.

"So you got better?"

"I was discharged from hospital," said Masha.

"Masha," said Gorbunov in a soft voice.

"Yes."

"Give me your hand."

"What for?" Masha went closer to him and gave him her hand as though to shake his. Gorbunov took her fingers, closed them in a soft little fist in his hand.

"And I didn't know you were here . . . he said again, as though this were the most important thing in life.

"Yes."

"And you've been here three days. . . ."

Gorbunov did not tell her how happy he was because the joy which overwhelmed him seemed natural to him.

"I thought so. . . I thought you'd come back," he continued.

"You thought . . ." began the girl.

"I was waiting for you. . . ."

"Yes," whispered Masha. Her face was again stern: the veins on her temples stood out just below her kerchief as though from some physical exertion.

The sound of voices came from the door, and then somebody ran down the corridor. Masha did not hear anything. She

could only feel Gorbunov's burning hot hand clutched over hers. She was upset and a little frightened. . . A minute or more passed and, as she sat there, her eyes opened wider and wider. The yellow circle of light cast by the lamp spread, the glass of water on the table glittered and the syringe twinkled like a star in a cloud of cotton wool. The glow that filled the air became ever brighter, its countless warm rays reaching out to the girl, calling forth all the tenderness that was in her. "I'm done for," flashed through Masha's mind. "Forever . . ." she thought, glad and relieved that it would be impossible now to change anything.

"You are angry with me?" came Gorbunov's voice from a great distance.

"What?" she asked, not understanding his question.

"Are you angry with me?"

"No," said Masha. "Why is he saying it?" she asked herself, frowning.

"I can see you are."

Masha shook her head and smiled. . . Then she quietly withdrew her hand. . . .

Gorbunov suddenly felt a sharp pain. He stopped talking, searching for the source of that pain, but could not find it. Something, he did not know what, was happening inside his body that seemed no longer to belong to him. An awareness of the fact that he was wholly dependent on whatever it was that was happening to him against his will, alarmed Gorbunov. He looked at his hands, to assure himself once more that they existed. Then he moved his feet and, although the movement increased the pain, he felt indescribable relief to know that both his legs were there.

"So I suppose. . . I'll have to lie in bed for a while?" began Gorbunov. He wanted to know where and how badly he was wounded but could not bring himself to ask the question outright.

"We're not easy to kill," said the lieutenant, looking questioningly at the girl.

"We certainly aren't," she said tenderly, straightening his pillow.

"I suppose I'll have to lie here for a week or two," continued Gorbunov. Leaning over him, Masha was quite close but her eyes looked past him.

"Maybe a little longer," she said. "We'll see about that later. . . ."

"Well, say, a month . . ." Gorbunov was trying to catch the expression in the girl's eyes as she rearranged his slipping blanket.

"It's hard to say. . . Perhaps even more than a month."

"More than a month will be too long," said the lieutenant.

Carefully he put his hand under the blanket and felt the edge of the dressing on his chest.

"That's where it is. Too bad," he thought, shuddering. "I'm hit"—Gorbunov suddenly remembered his last thought on the battlefield. He recalled the last impression of the attack—a blue expanse of land covered with water, soldiers in wet, shining helmets, the white fire of German machine guns—it was all so clear in his memory.

"Masha. . . Have you heard . . . how my battalion . . . " he asked in a troubled voice.

"I haven't heard. . . All right, I suppose. . . ."

"No."

"Why not?"

The lieutenant shook his head. He could now remember everything—the soldiers lying in the mud, his vain efforts to get them on their feet. "It is all over," he thought.

"Lukin . . . my commissar. . . Did they bring him in?"

"I don't know," answered the girl. She was thinking that the next day or the day after Gorbunov would be evacuated and she would have to wait until he recovered.

"Some water . . . please," said Gorbunov.

Under the blanket his fingers clutched the sheet. The pain in his chest was becoming unbearable.

Masha raised his head and carefully brought up a glass of water to his lips. He took a sip and turned his head away.

"I'm weak . . . after all . . ." he muttered.

"It's nothing. . . You must rest now . . ." said Masha in a weak voice.

"I'll catch up with my sleep . . . at least," said Gorbunov and tried to smile. His muscles, however, were strangely taut and he only grinned feebly.

"What's that? Why is it?" Gorbunov asked himself. Under the blanket he held his hands together in a tight squeeze so as not to shout. "I can't stand this for long," he thought. He was afraid he would cry out and glanced at Masha hoping

she would not guess his pain. He knew they could give him a shot to put an end to the pain but he was frightened of parting with Masha.

"How did you get on ... in Moscow?" he asked.

"You know I didn't find anybody at home," answered the girl.

"Wh-y-y?"

"Mum and dad went to the Urals... My sister and her daughter went to the country. So I didn't see any of them," complained Masha.

The light of the lamp fell on one side of her face and tinged her cheek with gold. Masha's eyes shone softly in the shadow that covered most of her face. Gorbunov looked at her hungrily, hurriedly, because his pain was terrible... He could not cry out as long as Masha was there, but his suffering was so great that it demanded an outlet, a prayer for mercy. And Gorbunov fought the pain with all the courage he possessed. But he was losing strength.

"Let me have some vodka ... please," he asked.

"Does it hurt much?" whispered Masha.

"No...."

Gorbunov's burning face turned a deep red. Only his cracked lips were white and colourless. His eyes were like the eyes of a blind man.

"What's the matter?" asked the girl and ran swiftly to the table. Gorbunov gripped the sidebars of the stretcher. A scream formed in his chest, reached his throat but did not escape his lips. When Masha returned with the syringe, the lieutenant was already unconscious.

By the end of the first day of the offensive the attacks undertaken by Ryabinin were almost all repulsed. Colonel Bogdanov had twice asked for troops of the main body in reserve to be sent to the aid of the battalions engaged in the unequal battle, but the general refused. And at the same time he ordered the weakened units to attack again and again.

Ryabinin left for Bogdanov's headquarters before dawn. The main drive had been timed for two o'clock in the afternoon, when the enemy would least expect it, but the GOC wanted to make sure that all preparations for the decisive battle had been made.

Two black walls of tree trunks and branches swept past on either side of the jeep. In the faint light cast by the blackout headlights the road was barely visible: liquid oily ruts, yellow pools... The jeep overtook a column of infantry and the driver slowed down as the car was getting past the men. Sometimes the narrow ray of light fell on the dark skirts of wet greatcoats plastered in mud, on hands swinging as their owners marched, on grenades and messtins hanging from soldiers' belts, and on the faces of the men. A light rain was falling and the drops ran obliquely across the windscreen. The tarpaulin cover flapped and slapped in the wind over the general's head....

"They're moving up... The flower of the army," thought Ryabinin. He was tempted to stop the car and walk at least part of the way with the troops. He wanted to feel himself back again amidst those men moving along shoulder to shoulder, to hear the rhythmic tread of marching feet, the heavy breath of his soldiers. The indistinct but insistent voice of old memories was so strong that he touched the driver on the shoulder. The driver turned his head....

"Drive on faster, Vassya, drive on..." he said overcoming his desire, for he really could waste no time.

He pulled a pocket watch out from under his greatcoat and the luminous hands showed that it had just turned five. "All right," he thought. "The infantry will take up their positions in time." His thoughts turned back to the zero hour when the main forces would strike a blow. "It seems I'm ruthless..." was the next thought that flashed through his mind and he pressed his thin lips tightly together.

The jeep was now moving slowly, with frequent halts and waits, and the general was beginning to worry. The greatcoats, hands, grenades and haversacks were now crowding almost to the jeep; the faces were indistinguishable in the darkeness, he could only guess where they were.

The battle had gone into the second day and the wounded came pouring into the Medical Battalion's Field Hospital. By the morning all the spare houses in the village had been taken over, as there was not enough room in the school. The wounded were lying and sitting on straw spread on the floor of the school corridor....

Ulanov, still limping, came into the school and stopped outside a door with glass panels in the upper half; a card marked "Class 5" still hung on the door. He looked round him with some misgiving. Everywhere he could see white bandages peeping through wet and crumpled greatcoats, arms that were thick from the lint of the dressings, bandaged legs that looked like tree trunks. Near the wall lay two men, their heads covered as though they wished to hide from every one the horror of their condition. Nikolai was astounded at the silence of these men. Orderlies walked among the wounded with mugs of tea and bread cut in thick slices. Nurses wearing white overalls over their quilted coats followed them round, shouting and giving instructions. It was cold in the school and the soldiers stretched their hands eagerly for the steaming enamel mugs. When they got them they ate and drank slowly, helping each other, for some of them could not use their hands to break the big lumps of sugar or spread butter on the bread. The sickly sweetish smell that made one's head swim was mixed with the smell of cheap tobacco and rye bread.

From time to time wounded men were carried past on their way to the operating table. Some of them groaned, others with bandaged heads were raving. Now and again pails filled to the brim with blood-red cotton wool were carried out of the operating room at the end of the corridor. Occasional cries came from there but nobody paid any attention to them.

Nikolai raised his head as the door he was facing opened. A girl came out of the classroom, wiping her cheek with her hand. The light from below fell on her oval face and little flat nose. She was flushed and her long eyelashes cast shadows that stretched out to meet her eyebrows. Ulanov jumped up supporting himself against the wall. Masha's appearance was little short of a miracle.

"Hullo, hullo," shouted Nikolai walking towards the apparition in a white overall. "You here?!"

"O-o-o!" drawled Masha, "and you here!"

"Yes, I am," said Nikolai happily.

"Where were you wounded?" Masha asked him quickly.

"Here . . ." he began and hesitated to mention that unfortunate foot again.

"All right. . . I'll come and see you soon," said Masha and went almost running down the corridor. Nikolai had brightened up at the meeting, and his glance followed her. He was so excited that he did not notice the girl's impatience or her sternness.

She soon came back, this time accompanied by a doctor in a bloodstained smock and a white cap. They were both hurrying and the girl did not even look at Ulanov as they went into the classroom. He peeped in at the door and saw Masha and the doctor standing over somebody in the far corner; the room was full of stretchers on which wounded men were lying. The surgeon said something and then squatted down on his heels, the girl bending over him. Suddenly she covered her mouth with her hand, as though holding back a scream. It was quite light in the room and Ulanov noticed that Masha had turned pale. He stretched out his head to get a glimpse of the man lying in the corner but he could not see him. The surgeon stood up, took a cigarette out of his pocket, rolled it between his fingers and went toward the door. Nikolai limped away from the door and the surgeon, looking back over his shoulder, said loudly:

"Get him ready. . . Quickly!"

Masha again ran out of the classroom and returned a minute later accompanied by another nurse—a plump blond girl. Ulanov attempted to speak to Masha, but she did not stop. Her companion stared at Ulanov. . . Soon he was called in to the doctor and did not see who was carried out on the stretcher.

More and more wounded poured into the field hospital with every hour. The roads had been washed out by the heavy rains, and the transport of wounded to the base was proceeding at a slow pace. But the columns of ambulances from the front line and ragged groups of wounded getting to the hospital on their own were becoming more frequent. When Nikolai returned, his place near the stove had been taken by someone else, and after milling around for a while he leaned against the wall.

"What did they say to you?" asked a sergeant.

"They are sending me to the base hospital," answered Nikolai, refraining from giving too many details. Although he did not now feel any great pain, the

doctor suspected a fracture and was sending him for X-rays.

"But what's wrong with you?" repeated the sergeant.

"This leg . . ." answered Nikolai angrily.

"Splinter or bullet?"

"No, I fell. . . ."

"That can happen, it often does before an attack," said the sergeant vaguely.

A stretcher was being carried toward them from the end of the corridor; Masha was walking behind it. She ran ahead of the orderlies, passed so close to Nikolai that her smock brushed against him, and opened the classroom door. The stretcher was taken into the room and Nikolai recognized his C. O. Gorbunov's head was rolling helplessly on the slipping pillow, and Ulanov cried out, afraid that the wounded officer would fall. For some reason, Nikolai was astonished primarily by the fact that the senior lieutenant had grown a thick blond beard; a strand of cotton from the bandage had caught in the bristles on his chin and lay across his tightly closed lips. Masha saw the stretcher safely into the room, went in herself and slammed the door behind her.

"When are they going to send us away, d'you know?" a soldier with a bandaged head enquired of Nikolai. Nikolai stared at him, not understanding the question.

The tall plump girl appeared at the door of the ward and the sergeant called out to her.

"Sister, is the lieutenant any better?"

Klava Golikova closed the door carefully behind her.

"It's a bad business, comrades," she said calmly.

"Will he die?" asked a soldier with a blond moustache. "They didn't operate," explained Klava Golikova, "they just looked at him and told us to take him back." She shook her head as though she were already bidding Gorbunov farewell.

"The C. O.'s dying," thought Ulanov in horror, "how did it happen? And what happened to the battalion?"—this was probably the first time he had thought along these lines—without any reference to his own fate. So far, it seemed, he had been mainly concerned with his own part in the war, and somehow there had been no time for anything else. This discovery was a shock to Nikolai.

"It's a great pity." Nikolai heard the deep bass of a soldier with a high forehead. "I've been with him ever since Kashira. . . ."

"I was at the frontier with him and then all through the retreat," said the sergeant.

"We were in too much of a hurry," said the soldier. "We attacked before we got ready. . . ."

"The people up top know best," the sergeant put in, but it was not clear whether he found that state of affairs to his liking or not.

Nurses and orderlies suddenly came running from all directions and crowded to the door. Those wounded who were strong enough followed them. A few minutes later the GOC was brought in on a stretcher. Nikolai, pressed against the wall, saw the general's big square face lying on the pillow, and recognized him at once. The soldiers stood by in silence and watched the stretcher carried into the operating room. They already knew that the general had been wounded by a mortar shell splinter when he was at Divisional Observation Post.

Lying on the operating table, the general felt little pain but a feeling of awkwardness, almost of confusion, never left him. When he sent his units into battle he totted up possible losses and did his best to keep the figure as low as possible, but it had never entered his head that he himself might be killed or wounded. This was not because he was usually in a comparatively safe place, as necessity dictates, but because his attitude to a battle was that of an author writing a story; he was not directly involved and this psychologically made him invulnerable.

Now, lying on a high table, he was completely stripped, ashamed of his heavy body and the greying hair on his chest. Doctors and nurses in snow-white smocks were moving all round him, and orderlies held oil lamps over the table, to give the surgeons light to work by. The faces of all of them were hidden behind gauze masks, which rather disconcerted the general.

One of the surgeons, a broad-shouldered, deep-chested man had finished washing his hands and was now wiping them with wet lint. The second surgeon was ready to start work and was holding his

hands up, palms outwards, as though he were praying. Farther away from the table, Doctor Lukonin, the C.O. of the Medical Battalion, was shifting nervously from one foot to the other. "What's he hanging around here for?" wondered General Ryabinin, "Has he nothing else to do?" But he did not say anything.

"We're starting in a moment, Comrade General," said the Medical Officer, interpreting the general's look of dissatisfaction in his own way.

"It takes the surgeons some time to clean their hands properly," explained Lukonin, apparently in order to keep the general interested. "We use Spasokukotsky's practical method—five minutes washing in a hot ammonia solution."

"Ammonia?" queried the general.

"Yes, ammonia. After that they dry their hands on a towel and clean them in alcohol for another five minutes."

"So that's what it is," said Ryabinin thinking his own thoughts. The main drive was soon to begin and the general could not imagine how it would proceed without him. He did not feel any great pain and hoped that after his wound had been dressed he would be able to return to his headquarters. He regarded the wound as an unfortunate interference, even something of an embarrassment, considering his position. Nevertheless, he experienced an excitement when the surgeon ordered the nurse to remove the bandage from his thigh.

His leg was carefully raised and a nurse in a mask began to unroll the bandage.

"Does it hurt, Comrade General?" asked Lukonin.

"Not much," answered the general, although the burning pain in his thigh was getting worse.

There was a spot of blood on the bandage, and the general watched with interest how it grew in size as each turn of the gauze came off his leg. Suddenly something red—live flesh—appeared when the almost black lint was removed. Ryabinin lifted his head and looked wonderingly at his wound. "Is it very dangerous? What do you think, doctor?" Questions that are asked by hundreds of people when they lie on the operating table formed themselves in his mind. But he said nothing. The wound, up above the knee and nearer to the inside of the thigh, did not seem very big. . . .

The surgeons talked quietly in consultation, but the sense of what they were saying did not reach the general. He heard sonorous Latin words full of mysterious significance, and tried in vain to guess what it was all about. The first surgeon kept constantly demanding from the nurse some disinfectant or instrument—bent scalpels, forceps and strangely curved scissors. Their shapes were as strange as their names. They glistened in the light of several lamps and were skillfully handled by fingers in shining rubber gloves. Watching the two surgeons at work, the general gradually grew calmer. Like so many of his soldiers who had been on this same table he trusted them all the more because he understood nothing of what they were saying and doing.

"What time is it?" asked the general suddenly.

"Five past eleven," answered the Medical C. O. glancing at his wristwatch.

There were still about three hours to go before the main attack began and he would have plenty of time to get back, realized the general.

"Well, my friends," he said, "are you going to stitch it up now?"

"What, Comrade General? That can't be stitched up," answered Lukonin.

"The wound must be thoroughly cleansed first. We can stitch up a wound on the spot only if we are sure there is no possible chance of infection."

"All right," answered the general, "have it your own way."

The surgeons seemed to be disputing something.

"I can't feel any tympany," said one of them.

"It isn't always present in such cases," answered the other.

The general was no longer following the incomprehensible discussion, thinking of the things to do when he got back to headquarters. The officers were no doubt alarmed over his being wounded.

"What do you suspect?" Lukonin asked softly the first surgeon who had left the table for a moment.

"Nothing definite . . ." he answered in a whisper. "Alcohol dressing!" he ordered loudly.

At last the dressing was fixed and the general ordered his clothes to be brought.

"I beg your pardon, Comrade General. . . We're going to take you into a ward, everything has been prepared."

"I'm going back immediately," said the general.

"What?" asked the doctor, as though he did not understand what the general was saying.

"I'm going back to HQ," said the general.

"Excuse me, but you must not move," said Lukonin in a weaker voice.

"Why? It's only a scratch. . . ."

"Of course, it is . . ." the doctor agreed readily.

"And, if it's so, you'll let me get dressed immediately. Call my adjutant."

"Just a moment, General . . ." Lukonin took the gauze mask off his face, but did not move.

"But why can't I go?" demanded the general now angrily.

"Your leg must have complete rest."

The nurse and the second surgeon also took off their masks and thus lost the advantage they had over General Ryabinin. Now they had ordinary human faces flushed after hard work. To Ryabinin returned the feeling that he was a general with full power over these officers.

"Obey my orders!" he said rising on to his elbows.

"Comrade General, your wound gives us some cause for worry," said the first surgeon.

"We are planning to send you to the rear base today," began the battalion C. O.

"Me?!" shouted the general holding up the sheet that was slipping from his chest.

"I'm sorry," muttered Lukonin getting more confused and flushed than ever.

The general realized that while he was lying in the field hospital the excitement in his HQ was growing. The critical moment, the turning point in the battle, was drawing closer, and every minute was precious. Ryabinin lay back on the pillow in silence, his pale lips pressed tightly together.

"So you insist I stay here?" he asked at last.

"I'm sorry, Comrade General," said the doctor. . .

"All right," the general agreed unexpectedly.

"Thank you," said Lukonin in gratitude, "now we'll get you to the ward. . . ."

"And order my signalmen to put telephones in there," said the general. "I'm transferring my HQ to the hospital."

"Yes, Comrade General," said the doctor with an astonished look on his face, and hurried to the door.

Nobody dared argue with the general and it was decided to put him in a little cottage close to the school. The wounded men already occupying the cottage were moved to the ward that had been prepared for the general. While all these preparations were being made, Ryabinin was taken to the general ward.

"I give you ten minutes to get everything ready," the general called after Lukonin as he was being carried away.

The general's stretcher was placed in the narrow gangway between two rows of wounded in "Class 5". He looked round the room, and the soldiers lying on their narrow stretchers raised their heads and looked at the general in silence.

"Good morning, comrades," the general said loudly in pleasant tones.

"Good morning," one or two voices answered him.

In a state of excitement that usually accompanies bold decisions, Ryabinin smiled. The idea that despite all the circumstances he and nobody else would begin the battle which he had so carefully prepared, pleased the general. The soldiers, however, looked at him guardedly with vague curiosity. The white bandages on their heads, legs and arms stood out prominently, making their faces seem darker. These faces were muddy grey, blue, brown, earth coloured or scarlet with fever.

"Lift me up and put a pillow under my shoulders," the general asked a young surgeon who had remained in the ward with him. He felt embarrassed that while talking to his men, he was lying among them instead of standing.

"Well, comrades, how are they treating you here?" asked Ryabinin sitting up on the stretcher.

"Thank you, they are treating us well," answered two or three voices.

"Did they feed you, did you get hot tea?"

"Yes, thank you . . ." said a blond soldier. He was standing at the door, swinging a bandaged leg, his arm round the neck of the pockmarked sergeant.

"Sit down, sit down . . ." said the general.

One of the orderlies gave the man a stool and he hopped over to it still holding on to the sergeant.

"Thank you," he repeated.

"What's your name? Your unit?"

The soldier tried to get up again but the general waved his hand, telling him to sit down.

"Private Nikitin, No. 2 Company, 1st Battalion, 12th Regiment," he answered according to formula, sitting to attention on his stool.

"Gorbunov's your C. O., isn't he?"

"Yes, Comrade Lieutenant General. He was until. . . ."

"Oh, yes, I remember . . ." began the general and then stopped. He followed the glances of the soldiers to the distant corner where he saw the copper-coloured profile of the young battalion commander, buried in the white pillow. "So he's here too!" thought the general with mixed feeling of pity and exasperation as he recalled his one and only meeting with Gorbunov.

"The C. O.'s dying," said the pock-marked sergeant loudly.

"What's wrong with him? Where was he wounded?" asked Ryabinin turning to the doctor.

"A torn artery, haemorrhage," whispered the doctor as though it were a secret.

"It's a pity about Gorbunov," said the general sincerely.

"A great pity," Nikitin agreed.

The general again looked towards the lieutenant. His profile with the closed, sunken eyes, was clearly outlined against the white pillowcase. The young woman, a mere girl with an extremely pale face, who was sitting beside Gorbunov, leaned against the wall, her eyes glued to the general.

"How did things go?" asked the general. "Have you been away from the battalion long?"

"The battalion's only a name. . . There isn't even a company left," said the sergeant.

"We can muster a good company here," objected Nikitin. He lifted his wounded leg, frowned and placed it in a different position. Obviously he could not find a comfortable way to hold it.

"So these men are all from Gorbunov's battalion," thought the general. He again took in his unexpected companions. A young soldier with a round, pleasant face, who was standing in the doorway looked at the general with a sternness that arrested the general's glance. Ryabinin thought how hard it must be for his men to suffer for what seems to them a hopeless undertaking.

He felt an alarming doubt—perhaps the cost of a success that has not yet been achieved was too great. The battle that he had planned in the quiet of his headquarters proved tragic for many people before the sounds of the first shots had died away. In his tactical calculations the Army Commander operated with such items as the number of active bayonets, fire power, mechanical equipment, but the moment he came face to face with his "active bayonets" they became his fellow human beings. He was sure that he knew and understood them better than anybody else but still he felt an indefinite urge to hide from those dozens of eyes in which he could discern bewilderment.

"I must be getting weak," was the way he explained this unusual feeling to himself. "Too bad I got wounded now!" Ryabinin felt an urge to cheer up the soldiers. . . He could not discuss with them the scope and scheme of the whole battle but he felt that the men had need of assurance and hope.

"Well, my friends, you didn't get the better of the Germans, did you?" he began.

"We did not, Comrade Lieutenant General," Nikitin confirmed.

"How did that happen? What d'you think?"

The soldier did not reply immediately, apparently choosing words.

"Am I to take it that I am to say the truth?" he asked, lowering his voice and looking at his wounded leg.

"Of course, only the truth."

Nikitin looked round at his comrades, seeking support.

"I think we attacked too soon."

"Why too soon?"

"The preparations weren't complete. . . Without proper preparations, you know yourself, one can't get far. . . We hardly heard our artillery at all. . . ."

"And the Jerries have plenty of guns. Drumming away at us all the time. . . Isn't it a pity, Comrade Lieutenant General?" came the rich, ringing voice of a swarthy young fellow lying on a nearby stretcher.

"And then, the weather," said Nikitin. "Spring's a bad time of the year. . . ."

"Right you are. There's enough mud to drown in it," said the pleasant-looking

soldier in the doorway, taking a step forward.

The soldiers took courage and one after the other said what they thought without any restraint.

"The young hotheads can't sit still in the trenches... Sent us out before time... And without orders from higher up, that's what I think..." Nikitin carefully put his leg back in the original position.

The general looked suspiciously at the young soldier, not knowing exactly what was concealed behind his last words. The soldier's tactful attempt to relieve him, Lieutenant General Ryabinin, of the responsibility for the failure, surprised him.

"No, my friends, that's not true," he began. "All of you fulfilled my orders to the letter... It's not your fault that the Germans are still clinging to their positions. They won't be there much longer...."

One of the wounded men groaned loudly and everybody turned to look at him. Then they turned back to the general.

"The battle isn't over yet, my friends," he continued in a loud voice, holding tight to the sidebars of the stretcher and trying to sit up straight, "that's why we should not draw conclusions too hurriedly...."

The wounded listened attentively and by their aloof and questioning faces the general could see that the men did not believe him. He kept on talking, telling them that the road to victory is never straight, that to win victory on a decisive sector one must sometimes retreat, make a detour, but he apparently convinced no one.

"What we've seen, we've seen," said the sergeant, "as for the rest, the future will tell."

The peculiar and trying sympathy which Ryabinin felt for the troops who had obeyed his orders, became the greater the more they refused to take comfort from his words. The general realized that only a speedy and brilliant success could bring back the wavering, if not altogether lost, faith of his men. "Well they'll hear about the victory and will rejoice..." he thought in an effort to calm himself. He took off his glasses to wipe them, and his wrinkled face, blinking, short-sighted eyes and tightly pressed lips made him look old and distraught.

"Comrade General, we'll get better and then we'll be only too willing..." Nikitin said pleadingly, for some reason or another.

"Of course," said the sergeant, "all we need is an overhaul...."

"Don't you doubt us, we've got our hearts in it...." began Nikitin and in his confusion he passed his hand over his waxlike bald head. "And it wasn't the Jerries who attacked us but we went for them. You have to know your own strength to attack in such weather."

"On the other hand, there's not enough artillery to go round... We understand..." a soldier with bandaged eyes muttered slowly and indistinctly.

"They seem to be trying to cheer me up," thought the general. "They're comforting me!" He was amazed, and his excitement almost choked him.

"Where were you wounded, Comrade General?" asked Nikitin in a warm voice.

"They got me in the leg," answered the general quietly. He began to shiver slightly and his face took on a yellowish hue.

"I got it in the leg, too... But that's nothing... It's not dangerous," said Nikitin.

"Where do you hail from, Nikitin?" asked the general; his voice now expressed gratitude.

"I'm from Slutsk District, Tsarovtsi Village...."

"You're a Belorussian?"

"Yes, and I've got to do a lot of walking before I get back home. I can't manage without a leg," said Nikitin jokingly.

The men crowding in the doorway suddenly stepped back, and the C. O. of the Medical Battalion hurried into the room. He reported to the general that the building in the school yard had been cleared.

"Goodbye, friends! Good luck and best wishes to get well," said Ryabinin as the orderlies lifted his stretcher.

"You, too, Comrade General! Get better and we'll be fighting together again," answered many voices simultaneously. "Good luck."

The general wanted to say something else to his soldiers whom he had thought he knew so well, and in whom he, apparently, lacked sufficient faith. Ryabinin

now began to understand that it was not simply their generosity that had prompted their amazing attempt to cheer up a wounded general... They needed a confident commander as much as he needed the strength of their spirit. This was their war, and they did not serve their commander but he served them... "How I'll push the drive now! What a blow I will strike!" thought the general, as though he were a hotheaded young lieutenant.

"We'll meet again in your Tsarovtsi, Nikitin," he said. "We'll meet again in Berlin. And we'll have a good word for the memory of those who'll be missing from our ranks."

"Goodbye, Comrade General... And thanks," said the sergeant gravely.

Telephone communication with the army was rapidly established. The Chief of Staff was called to the telephone and reported to the general that the attack he was expecting has been cancelled. The dam of the River Lopat had been damaged by a bomb and the river, swollen by the recent downpour, had flooded the positions held by the right wing of the army. After considering all the details, the general could do nothing but confirm the cancellation... For a minute he lay in silence, looking up at the ceiling and moving his thin lips soundlessly. Then he asked for a connection with Umanets of the Military Council. While waiting, he plotted in on the map those sections of the front that were flooded. He ordered his adjutant to send for the Colonels Bogdanov and Semenenko, Divisional Commanders.

The troops in the field hospital soon learned of the misfortune that had overtaken the army. Wounded who came straight from the front lines said that the water had filled their trenches; that some of the units had been cut off from the base, that communication between them was broken and that the artillery was submerged under water somewhere. Even if they did not believe everything they heard, it was quite obvious that the catastrophe made any further offensive action impossible.

"We'll switch to the defensive... There's no other way," said Nikitin, and everybody agreed with him. As though by mutual consent the troops did not mention the hopeful promises of the GOC. When Ulanov thought of the general's words he felt awkward about it, and knew that the others felt the same. The men would sink in thought, keep silent or would mutter something like "Yes, that's so," or "It can't be helped."

"Kolya!" somebody shouted to Ulanov. He turned round. Two paces away he saw a tall figure in a wet groundsheet, with the hood thrown back.

"What are you doing here? Wounded?" asked Ryabyshev, smiling.

"Ryabyshev, you!" shouted Nikolai. And although he was not particularly friendly with the man, and had scarcely ever taken any notice of this frightened and rather stupid soldier he was glad to see him.

"How's our company getting on?" Ulanov asked.

"We are getting it in the neck! All hell got loose!" Ryabyshev spoke loudly and confidently like a man who, unlike the others, succeeded in escaping mortal danger.

"Is Dvoyeglazov alive?"

"He was alive."

"And Kolechkin? Kulagin?"

"They're still alive. Bykov was killed...."

In going over the names of men in his platoon whose fate he had almost shared, Nikolai realized how closely he was bound up with them.

"Where are you now? What's the position?" he asked.

"We are done for," Ryabyshev said confidently, rolling a cigarette and lighting it. He told in detail how the company had got into the enemy's first line trenches. There had been short range firing all night, and the Germans pressed hard trying to drive the attackers out. In the morning there was a comparative lull and Ryabyshev had been ordered to accompany the wounded to the field hospital.

"We're on a bit of an island, water all round us and Jerries in front..." he said.

"Whoever's left there, won't get away," he added with the naive boastfulness of luck.

Ulanov, embarrassed, was silent.

"Have you seen Senior Lieutenant Gorbunov here?" asked Ryabyshev. "I was told to see him...."

"See him? I don't know about that . . ." Nikolai looked irresolutely at the door of the ward.

"Is he dead?" asked Ryabyshev.

"Not yet. . . Wait a minute, I'll have a look."

Nikolai was approaching the door, when it opened. Masha and the other nurse led a soldier with bandaged eyes out into the corridor. The plump girl ran to the door and Masha remained supporting the soldier. He stood there with his muscles all tense, his bandaged head thrown back.

Ulanov walked over to Masha.

"Well?" asked the girl, and Nikolai was again horrified, realizing that his lips were twisting into a grin that was quite out of place.

"There's a man here, he's been sent to the Senior Lieutenant . . ." he muttered, blushing.

Ryabyshev stepped forward. He looked with interest at the wounded man, and explained that the battalion commissar had sent him to enquire after Gorbunov's health.

"Who sent you?" Masha asked.

"Senior Political Instructor Lukin. . . He's taken Gorbunov's place. . . ."

"Lukin," said the girl and her face softened. "The lieutenant mentioned him. . . Wait here, I'll write a note to the commissar."

"Give him an armchair, sister, let him sit down . . . the hero . . ." said the pockmarked sergeant in a loud voice. Half lying, resting his good shoulder against the wall, he looked intently at Ryabyshev.

"What d'you mean?" asked Nikitin.

"He knows what. . ." The sergeant's black eyes flashed in the semi-darkness of the corridor.

"Don't make so much noise," said Masha.

"I am quiet, sister. Let him tell you himself how the senior lieutenant tried to persuade him: 'Get up, you sonnavobitch, get up! . . .' "

"Stop that swearing," said Masha.

"I'm sorry, sister, but I was near the battalion commander, he was shot down before my eyes . . . and all because of that swine. . . He was clawing the mud. 'I'm killed,' he said and the lieutenant tried to get him on his feet. . . Of course, he didn't." The sergeant grinned showing his white teeth.

"Stop picking on me," began Ryabyshev. He had but a faint memory of what had happened during the first hours of the battle. All he wanted now was to get out of the hospital.

"Come to enquire about his health . . . Judas!" The sergeant spat out the last word with particular relish.

Masha did not move. She stood with her hands pressed to her breast, and her beautiful blue eyes fixed on Ryabyshev. Golikova, who had just returned, looked scornfully at the wilting soldier.

"I was ordered to come and see the commander," he said.

"The whole land is covered with blood and tears," began Nikitin, "a soldier gives up his eyes, the women are crying, and you with your fat mug and strength enough for two have the soul of a jackal. . . ."

"It was my first time!" said Ryabyshev loudly and plaintively.

"Fellows, what's it all about?" asked the blind soldier.

Ryabyshev looked in horror at the bandaged head of the blind man and drew back but it wasn't any better when he looked at the others. From all directions dark, almost black faces, peered at him. They all looked alike because there was no mercy in any of them.

"I'll fix him," suddenly said the sergeant quietly as he stood up.

"You can't manage with one arm . . ." said an elderly private.

"You help me," said the sergeant screwing up his eyes as though he were measuring distance.

"Wait a bit, I'll do it myself," said Masha. She fumbled with her belt, unfastened her smock and pulled out a tiny bright revolver. Golikova put her arms around her friend.

"Let go," said Masha softly.

Ulanov thought of rushing to stop Masha but then turned round and taking Ryabyshev by the sleeve swiftly led him to the door.

When he was in the yard, Ryabyshev stopped and looked back.

"She would have killed me, by God she would. . . ."

"Sure, she would!" exclaimed Nikolai with admiration.

The convoy brought by Ryabyshev was not going back for several hours and Ulanov went to seek for some other means of returning to the front. He had

made up his mind to go back with Ryabyshev. "I'll manage somehow with a stick," he thought, "and in any case one has to lie down to shoot. . . ."

Half an hour later Ulanov and Ryabyshev were seated on rotting straw in a wagon going to the front. The driver had agreed to take them both for a package of tobacco.

The general's state of mind was marked, first and foremost, by a complete concentration. Ryabinin took no notice of things that were not directly connected with the offensive. The room in which he lay, the telephones that buzzed beside his bed, the men that kept coming and disappearing after receiving their orders, impressed themselves on his memory only insofar as they affected the matter in hand. The wound which condemned the general to immobility was placed in the same category with other factors affecting the battle.

Outwardly the general was calm but it was deceptive—complete absorption in anything is only superficially akin to calmness. But he was not excited in the ordinary sense of the word; people are nervous only when they doubt the soundness of their judgement. Ryabinin acted without hesitation, guided by a sharpened insight into the real nature of a military situation. From time to time the general would lie back on the pillow to rest, and then would be up again. He ate his dinner when it was brought, without knowing what he had eaten. For several hours he interviewed officers, issued orders, spoke over the telephone, and only towards evening did he permit himself to doze off for a while.

The lamps had been lit when the C. O. of the Medical Battalion, accompanied by a surgeon, entered the room.

Lukonin asked the general how he felt and asked permission to take him to the operating room to change his dressing. The general did not immediately answer. A sudden, vague premonition brought with it fear for the first time since he had been wounded. He refused, and the surgeon's insistence only increased his alarm. To avoid something that might interfere with him and his work, Ryabinin stalled.

"Come back a bit later, I'm too busy just now," he said. "Come again in half an hour."

When the doctors had gone, the general gave strict orders that they were not to be admitted again. Soon the Chief Surgeon and the Director of Medical Services arrived at the field hospital but the general refused to see them.

Kulagin refused to believe that Ulanov had returned to the doomed battalion of his own free will.

"Oh, you Moscovite, how did they make you come back?" he asked catching sight of Nikolai.

"Hullo," shouted Ulanov, "we had a hell of a time getting here . . . up to the waist in water," he added smiling at faces he knew so well.

"So, you were in a great hurry?" asked Kulagin winking to the others. After two days of continuous fighting the men looked gaunt and worn out. Some of them seemed to be stupefied, they were so quiet and pent up; the movements of others were jerky and unnatural, they started and cursed at every noise.

"Yes, we were in a hurry," the lad answered simply. "The water keeps rising all the time. It's over a yard deep in the woods down below. . . ."

"Bad luck . . ." said Kulagin. "If you'd kept back there another hour, you'd have had to stay the night." He tapped Nikolai on the chest with his finger and gave a short, unpleasant laugh.

"That's true. You can only get through on a boat now," agreed Nikolai. "Where's the commissar? I have an order for him."

Somebody volunteered to take Ulanov to the commissar, and he hurried after the guide, his stick tapping on the duckboards in the trench. He felt better and really didn't need it any longer but he stuck to it as a precautionary measure.

The trench occupied by what was left of Gorbunov's battalion was open to the enemy entrenched on the slope of a hill above them. In the intervals between the short exchanges of fire the troops could hear the enemy giving orders or cursing. Two German counterattacks were beaten off in the course of the day, and towards evening there had been a lull. A new danger came from behind them: looking through the loopholes of the trench the troops could see a huge expanse of water. The woods in the distance stood out in the middle of a huge lake, and isolated trees looked like floating bushes. Here and there patches of black earth stood above the water but they grew smaller and smal-

ler as time passed. The water was already within a few yards of the trench.

Kulagin and a few other soldiers, up to their ankles in mud, were erecting a breastwork on the western side of the trench. Ryabyshev was given a shovel and was working alongside them.

"Dig, dig," Kulagin encouraged him. "Dig until a grave is ready for you. . . ."

Ulanov found the Senior Political Instructor in the dugout that had belonged to a German officer. Lukin read the order, telling him to hold the position until reinforcements arrived. He turned the paper over, found nothing on the other side, folded it up and put it in his pocket.

Ulanov liked the new battalion commander, although he was nothing like Gorbunov. The gaunt figure of the Senior Political Instructor, his manners and vocabulary of an educated man, his rapid, spare movements had something comprehensible, almost kindred to Nikolai.

"I heard that the river had washed away the dam, and that the whole of the Lopat Valley was under water," he said. "You remember the little village called Lukyanovo—it's like Venice now."

The commissar did not seem to have heard his last words.

"Did you find out anything about Gorbunov?" he asked.

"Yes, I saw him."

"Well, well," shouted the commissar.

"He's in a bad way. . . He's mortally wounded."

Lukin said nothing and left the dugout.

It was already getting dark when Lukin, accompanied by his new runner, finished his tour of the positions. It was not a long journey, there was no more than 150 metres of full-sized trench manned by some fifty soldiers, not counting a few wounded they had been unable to evacuate. The enemy was numerically superior and Lukin was taking advantage of the lull, to strengthen the water-logged position he had to defend. He built a new breastwork so that the trench gave on to the west instead of the east. His machine guns—two Soviet Maxims and a captured "Hotchkiss",—he placed in what he believed to be the best positions. He divided the men into three groups under sergeants: there were no officers left in the battalion. He gave orders concerning meals, communications, care of the wounded and observation. He was not a professional soldier—he was a Master of Arts who had taken his degree in history, a civilian and a man of letters, as Ulanov correctly guessed—and he was guided mainly by common sense. Even after the counterattacks had been repulsed, he did not know exactly how he had done it.

An indefinite, broken noise came from the enemy positions—apparently after the long lull they were making preparations for a new attack. Lukin walked past the dark figures standing or sitting at the embrasures. He heard snatches of conversations but the soldiers would stop talking the moment he came near them. When he addressed them the men answered in monosyllables as though he were a stranger. He was, indeed,a stranger. Lukin knew little about his troops, the majority of them had arrived with the reinforcements on the day preceding the battle. Nor did they know him. The commissar realized, however, that the men felt they were caught in a trap.

Lukin and Ulanov had reached their dugout when they heard a long, drawn-out shout from the German trenches.

"Iv-a-an, come over to us! We have vo-o-dka!" The voice came out of the darkness, Russian spoken with an accent.

Lukin hurriedly unslung his tommy gun and Ulanov, following suit, unslung his rifle. A dark figure stumbled by and clambered up the wall of the trench.

"Where are you going?" shouted Lukin.

The soldier raised himself lightly above the breastwork and using his hands as a megaphone shouted to the Germans.

"Hi, Fritz, better join us! Our vodka is stronger than yours," rang out Dvoyeglazov's tenor.

This caused laughter in the trench and some of the men cursed in approval.

"Iva-a-an! Don't be afraid. . . We'll give you bread," came again out of the darkness.

"We've got ba-a-acon!" Dvoyeglazov taunted them.

Dvoyeglazov turned to his comrades.

"Shoot at the voice," he said.

"Iv-a-a-an, surrender. . . We'll treat you well!" continued the German.

Three or four shots rang out.

Lukin reslung his tommy gun and went back to the troops.

"That's the way to talk to them, comrades!" he said.

"Have you got a big family?" he asked turning to Kulagin.

"Big enough," answered the soldier unwillingly.

"How many of you?"

"I've got sons, two of them. . . ."

"So we have to hold on to this position in order to defend your sons . . ." said Lukin.

"We know that, we've had it explained to us before," answered Kurlagin gloomily.

"Do you often get letters from home?" asked the commissar, as though he had not noticed Kulagin's mood.

"They write, they write. . ." The whites of the soldier's round eyes gleamed in the darkness. "Can you tell me, Comrade Commissar, whether it may happen that a family is not given a pension?"

"What d'you mean, a pension?"

"Every one of us here will be drowned, and nobody would know what's happened to me. They may think I've been captured."

"The regiment will report," said Dvoyeglazov.

Suddenly that same drawn-out cry came from the German positions again, but a little more to the right.

"Iv-a-an, surrender. We have vodka."

"He's still alive!" said Dvoyeglazov with regret. He raised his tommy gun and let off a deafening burst. The brilliant flashes of small arms fire came from various points along the trench. They had no sooner stopped firing than the unreachable, invulnerable voice began again, mocking the Soviet soldiers.

"Iva-a-an, it's good over here. We've just got our rations. . . ."

"He's right under our noses and we can't get him," said Kulagin bitterly. He had not told the commissar that his family had recently become smaller. His little daughter had died in evacuation, and the Germans were as guilty of this as they were of the fact that he probably did not have much longer to live.

"We'll get him. Eventually we'll get him," said the commissar and walked away. Kulagin muttered:

"We'll see how you get him. . . ."

As though in agreement, the voice drawled out of the darkness:

"Iva-a-an, surrender! Come out!"

For some time the Russians kept firing at the German, and finally gave up. The monotonous, annoying voice went on shouting for a long time, sounding from the right, then from the left. The water kept lapping the breastwork, beating against it unceasingly.

When Lukin got back to his dugout after inspecting the positions he sent for the Communists. All in all, there were six of them. He was about to finish his short speech when Ulanov, having delivered a message, came down the slippery steps into the dugout.

"I don't know when we shall be relieved . . ." he heard the commissar say in his soft, professorial voice. "Maybe even tonight. . . Perhaps tomorrow. All I know is that we have to hold the position. The situation is particularly difficult because so many of the men have not been in battle before. . . It seems to me that we, and we alone, must bear the responsibility for their behaviour under fire. But never have Communists refused to shoulder responsibility." Lukin was addressing these words to himself, as well as to the others.

"I have said nothing that's new to any of you," he continued, "until reinforcements come we have only ourselves to rely on and the fact that we are Communists. Does anyone wish to speak? You, Petrovsky?"

"Everything is quite clear, Comrade Commissar," answered Petrovsky quietly.

"I am in a tough spot, in Number 3 Platoon," came a voice out of the darkness. "There are no other Communists, and I haven't even got enough grenades to go round. . . ."

"I'll send you grenades," promised the commissar.

The men left, one by one.

The trench was lit up by the cold light of rockets. The Germans sent them up in long series, and they hung in the sky like huge lamps.

Nikolai looked round, feeling that something astounding might happen. It was not so much the fact that the surroundings changed continually like stage scenery. In this unearthly night the men were living a strange, incomprehensible life. All the normal, every-day relationships between them were broken down, and their place was taken by new ones, more direct and binding.

Suddenly a machine gun on the right flank began to blaze away, and within a couple of minutes all the defenders of the trench were firing. The Germans were counterattacking and the commissar, putting on his glasses, climbed up to his lookout. Nikolai took up a position at a vacant loophole. At first he could see

nothing but the torn-up earth flooded with dead light, and streaked with dark inky shadows, but soon he saw a man crawling towards him. As though somebody had whispered in his ear: "Shoot, it's a German," he hurriedly raised his rifle that had become suddenly heavy and difficult to handle. He closed the bolt, and paused for a moment to overcome a dull resistance born of the fact that he had never before fired at a human being. Scarcely taking aim, Ulanov fired but missed. He began to fear that in another minute the German would leap into the trench. Frantically recalling the rules of aiming, he at last got his sights on the grey helmet, held his breath and fired. . . The German shook his head, tried to crawl back but remained sprawled on the ground. "I've killed him!" Nikolai thought in astonishment.

The firing continued all along the trench. The weapons got warm, and the warmth felt good to the cold hands of the soldiers. The firing now grew weaker on the right flank where the enemy had been beaten back. On the left, he was still trying to break through. Lukin got down from his embrasure and went over to the machine gun that was hammering away nearby. As he approached the Hotchkiss, he found that he had to walk through water. A stream that almost reached the knees was flowing along the floor of the trench, reflecting the rockets bursting overhead. Lukin splashed about in the water, examining the trench. Fat Egorov, a platoon commander came running to him, saying that the breastwork on the right flank had given way.

"Raise it. . . Put all your men to it . . ." said Lukin in a loud, sharp voice. Then a soldier without a rifle came running round the corner of the trench towards Lukin and the commissar shouted still more sharply: "Where are you going?"

The soldier ran past him, as though he had not heard, throwing up the water with his feet.

"We'll drown," he shouted, drawing close to the machine gunners who immediately stopped firing.

Other running soldiers appeared. Ahead of them, leaping along, ran a long-legged soldier, with the skirts of his unbuttoned greatcoat dangling in the water.

"Get back!" shouted the commissar, but the soldiers would not stop. "They'll have all the others following them," thought Lukin.

"Get back!" he repeated; his voice broke and rose to a shriek.

A fresh group of soldiers appeared from round the bend, one of them climbed on to the breastwork but slipped and fell into the water. The shouts and cries now merged into a continuous roar, smothering all other sounds. Lukin could not even hear his own voice. The commissar realized his complete helplessness, and yet he was not angry with the soldiers who disobeyed him—he rather felt guilty before them. He took a step back in order to gain a few seconds, pulled out his revolver and raised his hand with the feeling that he was throwing a lifeline to a drowning man. Without aiming, he fired pointblank at the long-legged soldier. The men, blinded by the shot, stopped dead. A sudden silence fell. The tall soldier clapped his hand to his shoulder, staggered to the side and leaned against the wall of the trench.

"Get back to your places," said Lukin dully. He turned round and saw Ulanov standing beside him, rifle in hand, as though ready to fight and die with the commissar.

"Fire!" Lukin shouted to the machine gunners. When the Hotchkiss again opened up, the troops turned round and ran back to their places.

Divisional Commissar Voloshin, Member of the Military Council of the Front, and Major General Professor Yuriev arrived at the field hospital in the morning. They had been travelling all night, first in a car and then on horseback, and the professor, who was no longer young, was very tired. He was skinny, feeble looking as he stood before the dull oval mirror in the Medical C. O.'s room and wiped his face with Eau-de-Cologne. The Divisional Commissar, a tall, well-built man with a shaven head, walked from corner to corner of the room, listening to Lukonin's report.

"And so the GOC didn't let you into the room any more?" asked Voloshin, angrily.

"Not even once. . . Said he had no time. . . " Lukonin did not take his eyes off the commissar who was striding back and forth across the room.

"But you say his wound is serious!" shouted Voloshin so loudly that Yuriev looked up at him. Then, more quietly,

the commissar asked: "Has he really transferred his HQ here?"

"Yes, to a certain extent. . . ."

"Pavel Ivanovich!" said the commissar turning to the professor. "Did you ever hear anything like it?" It was obvious, however, that the man from the Military Council had become more cheerful. He was worried about the catastrophic situation in the army whose positions were submerged under water, and was somewhat calmed to learn that Ryabinin, contrary to expectations, had remained at his post. It was, therefore, to be expected that the withdrawal of the troops from the flooded area had been effected in good order and without any considerable losses.

The windows were still blacked out in the GOC's room, and two lamps were burning, one hanging from the ceiling, the other standing on the table. Ryabinin's large, almost square face with its sagging cheeks was prominent on the pillows on which he was half-lying. On a stool to the right of his bed were two telephones in wooden boxes, and a saucer with slices of lemon on it. A big, round, luminous watch lay beside them. The smell of medicine and of something else, weak and sweetish, hit the commissar's nostrils unpleasantly.

"Sergei Antonovich, good morning!" said Voloshin loudly, smiling to hide his embarrassment.

"Comrade Commissar," the GOC began.

"Lie down, lie down, Sergei Antonovich!" the commissar interrupted him and gave him his hand. "How you scared us," he went on. "Supreme Headquarters asked after your health. I've brought our magician to you, Major General Yuriev," he said introducing the professor.

"You didn't have to bother. It's only a scratch," said the general.

"I'm glad to hear it," said the professor amiably.

"Makes me sick, though. I told these physicians of mine to give me something for the stomach."

"And did they?" asked the professor who had often heard such requests from wounded men suffering from gangrene.

"They got that lemon for me," said Ryabinin.

There was a telephone buzz, and the general took the hand set from his adjutant, for a minute he listened attentively, looking over the top of his glasses at the ceiling.

"Thank you, old chap!" he said. "No, we won't postpone it any longer. . . Don't take too much risk, nevertheless. . . Stand where you were ordered to, and don't budge an inch. . . Report to me frequently." The general replaced the hand set.

"Get me Bogdanov on the line," he said. The adjutant left the room, and the general turned his dry, burning eyes on Voloshin.

"I begin in half an hour, Pyotr Andreyevich!"

"Begin what?" asked the commissar.

"Artillery barrage. . . According to the rules. . . ."

The GOC reached for the map lying on his bed.

"My right flank is flooded," he said. "Fortunately, my artillery positions are scarcely affected. The most important thing is," Ryabinin ran his tongue over his thin bluish lips, "the most important thing is that the Lopat has flooded not only our side but also behind the German lines. Here, look, this low ground is regular spring floodland. . . And air reconnaissance has confirmed that there is a big flood there. . . ."

"Have you really decided to attack?" asked Voloshin, looking at the general as though he doubted his sanity.

"How could I miss such an opportunity? At first I thought I would just press the Germans back, but now I will give them a good bath. I'll drown them. . . If I break through here, at Kamenskoye, they will have nowhere to retreat. The Germans have two divisions crowded on a territory as big as a handkerchief."

"But the units on your right flank will have to attack through the water," said the commissar.

"That's all the more grist to my mill," said Ryabinin. "The Germans will never expect an attack there. Our infantry will make it. . . Soviet infantry crossed the Sivash. . . ."

"Have you had time to regroup?"

"It had to be done! Brigade Commissar Umanets has been with the troops all the time. We had a whole night to do it in."

"Only one night . . ." put in Yuriev. He was standing at Ryabinin's shoulder, too thin for a man of his age, and smart looking—he was also examining the map.

"It's true we did not get any sleep. But we can manage to miss one night." Rya-

binin's mouth opened into a wide grin. "I've had trouble with the medical people, though. I kept chasing them away but they would come back knocking at the door. . . ."

"Bogdanov is on the line," reported the adjutant.

"How are things going, old chap?" asked Ryabinin taking up the hand set. "Oh, I'm all right." He listened, chewing his lips. "I know you won't let me down. . . The depth there is one-half or three-quarters of a metre. . . You won't let me down, old chap." The GOC threw back his head and shouted into the phone, "Carry on, Colonel."

Voloshin got up and walked excitedly up and down the room. The yellow light of the lamp flashed on his shining shaven head.

"How daring!" he muttered.

The GOC lay back on his pillow and seemed to be listening for something; then he took up his watch and looked at it.

"Still five minutes to go," he said, but at the very moment the people in the room heard the distant roar of artillery.

"The watch has begun to lose," said the general in astonishment. The cannonade grew stronger outside, as though mountains were tumbling down.

Ryabinin gave a faint smile, thinking how loudly the gunfire would resound in the hospital, probably awakening Nikitin and the sergeant with the Gypsy eyes. Voloshin walked over to the window and pulled down the groundsheet that covered it. The sun, streaming into the room, lit up the general's face. Screwing up his eyes, he was still smiling, but his face was grey as though it were covered with dust.

"Sergei Antonovich, now please let them change your dressing," said Voloshin.

"D'you think it's necessary?" asked Ryabinin.

"Absolutely." The commissar, shuddering inwardly, looked at the general's changed face. "There is time while the barrage is still on."

When the bandage had been taken off the general's leg Yuriev saw that he came too late. Dark, greenish patches had appeared on the general's body; the muscles deep down in the wound had turned white. The professor passed his finger lightly over the swollen thigh, feeling the soft rustle of the gases penetrating the cells of the tissue. He was astonished at the fact that the general had still kept going. Yuriev's assistants, the Army Surgeon and the doctors of the field hospital—waited in silence to see what the professor would do. It was obvious that the gangrene had already gone so far, that it could no longer be stopped. Yuriev, however, was known to have worked miracles when others had lost all hope.

The GOC lay with his eyes closed, resting. The continuous roar of his guns had already ceased and there was a deep silence outside—the infantry had launched their attack. In his mind the general was imagining their movement. Suddenly he felt uneasy about his right flank which, judging by the time, had just come into contact with the enemy. . . Ryabinin opened his eyes—people in white smocks were standing round him, doing nothing. . . "Why do they tarry so long?" he wondered. Yuriev met his glance and turned away to avoid answering the question in the general's eyes, which he misinterpreted. The GOC closed his eyes again, and the immense map of the battlefield came to life. Two red arrows with fattened tails like comets were throbbing and flaming across the greenish-blue background. . . The attacking units were now in action along the whole front, and had probably reached the first line of German trenches.

The professor hesitated to consider the general's case as hopeless, although he knew that better than anybody else. He raised his hands, his gloved fingers moving as though casting a spell. At the operating table he was always bold, and had more successful operations to his credit than most surgeons. But his faultless knowledge of what was happening in his patient's body, a knowledge that was like inspired guessing, did not betray the professor. He realized his helplessness and, as always, it pained him.

Yuriev ordered the nurses to clean the wound and anesthetize the part of the body to be operated on. . . He did everything that could be done in such cases, but by the end of the operation his assistants knew that the general was doomed.

The wound was again dressed and the GOC asked to be lifted up. He put on his glasses and waited until Yuriev removed his mask.

"Well, professor, what did you find?" he asked.

The surgeon wiped his face with a hand-

kerchief and the smell of Eau-de-Cologne filled the room.

"You'll have to stay in bed, General," he said.

"How long, do you think?"

"I'm afraid it will be a long time. . . ."

The Divisional Commissar was waiting for Yuriev in a room upstairs, the office of the C. O. the Medical Battalion. He listened to the professor's report and frowned incredulously.

"Tonight, you say?"

"Yes, or tomorrow morning," Yuriev walked slowly over to the window and sat on the windowsill.

"But Ryabinin feels alright, doesn't he?" objected the commissar.

"Agony will set in after a few hours," answered Yuriev.

"But I don't understand," Voloshin kept up his objections. "We've just been talking to him. During the night he organized a brilliant operation."

"During the night he could have been saved, though at the cost of an amputation," said the professor after a short silence. . . .

"Then why didn't they save him?" shouted the commissar. . .

"He wouldn't allow the doctors in the room," said the professor. "But after the amputation he would not have been able to be in command."

"Last night he won a battle," said the commissar.

"Yes," agreed the professor, "he won a battle but lost his life."

. .

The direction of the battle was gradually slipping out of the GOC's hands, despite all his efforts. It wasn't so much because he couldn't follow his advancing units as that he was losing the grasp of what was going on. He was getting very forgetful, and listening to a report he would suddenly notice that he lost the sense of what it was all about. Issuing orders, he would stop halfway through a phrase, as though he were trying to remember how it began. It seemed Ryabinin's mind had become exhausted; although he was still conscious, conscious enough to realize his helplessness. The pain was growing and it was more and more difficult for him to fight it. . . In the meantime the telephones kept ringing at frequent intervals, and the adjutant now and again reported the arrival of liaison officers. They'd come into the room, making a noise with their boots, and bringing with them the smell of petrol, horse sweat, fresh air and damp earth. . . The officers stood near the bed and looked aghast at the burning-hot, greyish yellow face of the old general.

Voloshin sat at the table, waiting to be left alone with the GOC. It was no longer sympathy but dire necessity that demanded the commissar's intervention. No matter how great the role played by Ryabinin in preparing the attack may have been, his further participation was becoming a hindrance. . . At last, the adjutant took the artillery captain from army headquarters out of the room, and Voloshin moved his chair closer to the bed.

"Sergei Antonovich, isn't it time for you to leave things alone? You need rest . . ." he said in a friendly way that gave his advice no particular significance.

"How do you mean leave things alone?" demanded the general. "I'd be glad to, but the Germans are still resisting . . ." he said jokingly.

The eyes behind his spectacles, however, looked at the commissar with suspicion.

"I'm afraid my right flank may be too late. . . Success depends on the advance on Kamenskoye," Ryabinin spoke slowly and precisely as though he were trying to demonstrate how fully he understood the situation.

"Bogdanov's there, he'll manage," objected the commissar with conviction. "You have to get better. . . ."

"But no reports have come in from him. . . I have ordered them to get him on the phone. . . ."

"You have to take care of yourself, General. Your wound is more serious than they thought at first. . . ."

"Yes, it's getting troublesome," agreed the GOC.

"Suppose we order Glukhov to take over . . ." Voloshin hesitated, seeking suitable words, "as your temporary substitute. He's your Chief of Staff and he's in the thick of it. He's a good commander. . . ."

"Don't send me to the rear base right now. The Germans are still in Vyazma."

"Sergei Antonovich, I want you to come back to us as soon as possible," said Voloshin hotly.

"Wait a bit," repeated the general with sudden vigour.

The adjutant, grey from sleeplessness, with his thin hair straggling unbrushed

across his bald patch, reported the arrival of a liaison officer from Bogdanov. The GOC moved impatiently in his bed, trying to sit up. A young lieutenant wearing a cap with a red band and a mud-splashed groundsheet stood in the doorway and reported in a loud voice. The general called him over and the officer removed his cap and walked on tiptoes over to the bed. His face, glistening with perspiration, betrayed embarrassment.

"Go on, I'm listening," said the general.

"Colonel Bogdanov reports that at eight sharp, in accordance with the order, he attacked in the direction of Kamenskoye. At the same time two battalions of the 12th Regiment forced the water barrier. . . ."

Suddenly it seemed to Ryabinin that the officer stopped speaking although his lips kept moving. A strange roar rose in the room and drowned out everything else. . . The window, the table, the tall figure of Voloshin, the green groundsheet of the lieutenant all moved suddenly and swayed as though carried by a wind. . . The general grabbed at the telephone on the stool beside his bed, dropped the hand set on the floor, but did not notice it. "I must listen to the end, I must. . ." His despair was boundless for he had stopped hearing. . . The lieutenant stepped back a pace, stiffened to attention, and the GOC realized that the officer had now really stopped speaking. He had to say something, but the general did not know the contents of Bogdanov's report.

"Well, and what else?" he began loudly because he could not remain silent any longer. When he heard his own words he was pleased. . . But he noticed the confusion on the face of the officer, and the dour glance of Voloshin. He tried once more to convince these witnesses of his weakness that nothing important had occurred.

"Give me . . . the . . . map . . ." he asked. Holding on to the telephone box with one hand, Ryabinin noisily spread the sheets of paper on his blanket. His fingers, swollen at the tips like those of a man doing physical work, trembled slightly. . . .

"So . . . so . . ." muttered the general trying to gain time. "What happened to Bogdanov?" he thought concentrating his attention on the map. . . Time passed—a minute, two, three. . . .

Voloshin told the adjutant in a whisper to lead the officer out of the room, and then he bent over Ryabinin.

"Take a rest, Sergei Antonovich. . . Take a rest, my dear friend," he said with awkward tenderness. "Give me the map. . . You're tired. . . ."

"Already?" asked the general weakly. He did not properly understand what Voloshin was saying, but felt that the worst has happened.

"What did Bogdanov report? Surely he did not fail?" he wanted to ask but he had no time—the commissar had already closed the door behind him.

Ryabinin fell back on the pillow, and for the first time he groaned, as though his torment had awaited the hour when, at last, he would hand over the command.

Masha Ryzhova met Professor Yuriev as he was on his way to the operating theatre. She stood in front of him, clicked her heels and asked permission to speak.

"What can I do for you?" asked the Major General.

"I've asked everybody . . . I asked them to show Senior Lieutenant Gorbunov to you. . . They said it wasn't any use, nothing could help him. . . ."

"Go back to the ward, Ryzhova," said the young doctor who was with the professor.

Masha did not move, and as the professor could not pass her by, he asked:

"And what's wrong with this Gorbunov of yours?"

"He can be saved. . . He led his men to attack and was wounded because of a coward who wouldn't stand up and fight."

"What is he to you, this senior lieutenant?"

"Nobody!"

"Your selfless interest does you credit. Show me this 'nobody'!" said the professor looking at the girl with curiosity. On his instructions Gorbunov was taken to the operating room. Masha waited outside. She felt as though a blow might fall on her at any moment. The feeling of that impending danger grew so strong that when she saw Anya Manevich, she embraced her, seeking protection.

"M-m-masha, what's the matter? Is he d-d-dying?"

"No!"

"They've just brought M-m-maximova in, w-w-wounded in the h-h-head," said Anya.

"What Maximova?"

"You remember, Dusya, who used to live in our room. She doesn't recognize anybody," continued Anya.

"How did they get her?"

"A Jerry plane shot up a column of wounded that she was with."

"What?" asked Masha in a tired voice. She broke away from Anya and leaned against the wall. "I can't stand it any longer," she stammered and suddenly beat her clenched fists on her friend's shoulders.

"What's got into you?" cried Anya, frightened.

"It's too awful! I'll remember it a hundred years. . . A hundred years . . ." screamed Masha.

"Hush, Masha, calm down."

"What agony! How we are being tormented!" groaned Masha.

The white doors of the operating room opened unexpectedly and two doctors came out, flushed and perspiring.

"That was an operation not to be forgotten," said one of the doctors. "Just to think what he did to that artery!" He noticed the two girls and said to Masha cheerfully:

"Your Gorbunov will live."

Masha tried to speak but words would not come out.

"I tell you he's going to live . . ." he repeated in a loud voice.

"He will live . . ." said Masha slowly, and it took all her strength to make her lips move. Suddenly her quilted jacket and her smock seemed too hot and too tight for her. . . .

Gorbunov regained consciousness towards evening. Masha was fast asleep at the table, her head resting on her folded arms. Looking at her, Gorbunov scarcely recognized her now—in the dying rays of the sun he saw her short boyish crop, her thin hands, roughened from work, the heavy boots that seemed too big and clumsy for her, and the faint colour of her pale cheeks. A feeling of tender sympathy came over him. However weak the lieutenant may have been, he now felt that he was himself—a man of twenty-two, a soldier, an officer of the Red Army. He was worried by the thought that he was to blame for the state of exhausting fatigue that Masha was in, and he was waiting with something approaching fear for the girl to wake up.

Masha woke up when the orderlies came to carry a stretcher out of the room. She raised her head, looking confused at first but that expression soon gave way to one of disquiet. Turning round her eyes fell on Gorbunov and she jumped up, pressing her hands to her breast.

"Masha," began the lieutenant implor-ingly.

"So that's . . ." she began, frowned and sobbed.

"You've been worried . . . Masha . . ." muttered Gorbunov.

"No, I haven't," Masha said in a plaintive voice.

"Masha," called Gorbunov.

"What can I get you?" she whispered, pressing her little fists to her breast and approaching the stretcher.

"Give me your hand . . ." Gorbunov struggled to sit up. "Your hand. . . ."

The girl bent over him, and he took her hands and pressed them to his lips, as if begging forgiveness.

"Don't do it," said Masha looking at her broken nails. She pulled her fingers back weakly but Gorbunov would not let go and, gradually, through the confusion on her face, there appeared a strange, haughty smile, and Masha lightly stroked his damp, prickly cheek.

"Masha!" came Klava Golikova's loud voice from the door. "Masha!"

Klava burst into the room and stopped suddenly, looking at Masha and Gorbunov.

"Such news!" she burst out excitedly. "We've broken through the German lines!"

"What? What did you say? What?" repeated Gorbunov several times.

"It's true. The wounded have just been brought back from there."

"You're sure you haven't made a mistake?"

"How could I?" Klava threw her arms round Masha. "How happy I am . . . and specially for you," she added in a whisper.

"And what about . . . my battalion?" asked Gorbunov as though the plump, noisy girl ought to know all about it. But she didn't. "Do try and find out, will you?" Suddenly he gave a hoarse laugh. "We have broken through after all! I be darned!"

It suddenly turned warm in the morning. The sun, rising over the trees, played on the wet earth and a light steamy mist

pierced by rays of sunlight rose over the trenches. Lukin's men had turned to the east, to warm their benumbed faces and hands in the sun. The water in the trenches was knee high although the troops had fought stubbornly against it all night. By morning they were completely exhausted—this was the beginning of their third day of ceaseless effort.

The Senior Political Instructor again inspected his positions. He splashed through the water past silent, exhausted men who had become completely indifferent to the fate awaiting them. A few of them were still making attempts to keep going: they had dug niches in the side walls of the trench where they could at least be out of reach of the water. The others seemed to have lost all will of resistance.

As the commissar drew near his own dugout he heard somebody playing a mouth organ. Kolechkin, sitting on a beam that had been driven into the trench wall, was playing a waltz.

"Keep it up," said the commissar when he saw the ex-lieutenant was about to jump down.

"It's an old-time waltz," said Kolechkin. "I don't like the new music, jazz and all that sort of thing. . . ."

"How did you get into the infantry?" asked Lukin.

Kolechkin passed his hands over his cheeks: he was unshaven and this apparently worried him.

"Got off my course, Comrade Commissar! . . . With disastrous results . . ." he said gravely.

"Can you be a little more precise?"

"The course that had been given me lay some 200 kilometres to the north of Klin. . . I turned off to take a look at the Chaikovsky Museum. I had dropped my bombs and was on my way back home. . . ."

"Did you find the museum?"

"Of course I did. . . Only I had to fly pretty low. . . And that's where they shot me down. . . I got away from the Germans, of course, but I was court-martialled just the same. . . ."

"And now you are trying to earn a new plane?" said the Senior Political Instructor.

Kolechkin smiled as much as to say that he appreciated a kind word, even if he did not believe it.

"That's what the Court Martial told me," he said.

"When you get it, don't lose your course again," said Lukin as though he did not doubt that Kolechkin will soon be flying.

"Thank you, Comrade Commissar!" answered the pilot sincerely but hopelessly.

The whole night Lukin had awaited the reinforcements promised by the regiment but they never arrived. Just before dawn another runner had come from Major Nikolayevsky with instructions to hold the position at all cost. The commissar was afraid that his men would not be able to beat off another attack and had said a few words of encouragement to almost every one of them. Both he and the troops, however, realized that the rising water would soon drive them out of the trench and expose them to the fire of German machine guns.

Back in his own half-flooded dugout Lukin staggered over to a table that looked like a little raft. The black water round the raft was covered with all sorts of floating rubbish. The commissar pulled off his boots, poured the water out of them, sat on the table with his legs tucked up under him and got his notebook out. He wanted to send a report back and wrote with the greatest difficulty.

Lukin called for Ulanov and when he arrived told him to bring the runner from Regimental HQ. Cold and wet, Nikolai stamped about in the water but his eyes looked smilingly at the commissar.

"Suppose I send him?" thought Lukin. There was very little chance of getting to regimental HQ uninjured but there was no chance of survival for those who remained in the trenches. Lukin wavered for a moment, not knowing whether he was doing the right thing by sending the boy simply because he took to him.

"You get ready as well. . . You'll go together . . ." he ordered.

"Comrade Commissar! . ." Nikolai began.

"Obey orders!" said Lukin, angry with himself for having granted Ulanov that which was refused to the others.

Ulanov left and at that same moment the commissar heard the roar of artillery. A few clots of earth fell from the roof of the dugout. "It's beginning," said Lukin to himself, hurriedly pulling on his boots.

The rapid fire and the bursting of shells soon merged into a continuous roar. The sounds came from the left flank—obviously a big battle was raging there but nobody knew who had started it.

Another sound soon reached them, growing steadily, as aircraft appeared from behind the woods. They flew so low over the water and over the heads of the men in the trenches that some of them involuntarily flinched. They saw the red stars on the green wings of the planes and their faces lit up. The bombers dived straight at the German trenches. The men shouted something after the aircraft but they could not hear either themselves or others in the terrific roar of explosions.

The aircraft were still circling over the German positions when the attacking infantry came out of the woods. The men were up to their waists in water, their rifles high over their heads.

The aircraft had given the German trenches a good blanketing but nevertheless some German machine guns came to life here and there. They were firing over the heads of Lukin's men and their bullets struck the water like the lash of a whip. No sooner did the commissar think of trying to stop these enemy machine guns than his troops had of their own accord turned all their fire on them.

The infantry coming to Lukin's aid had already covered half the distance from the woods. The water was shallower there and they were running now. They lifted their feet high, throwing up showers of water behind them. Occasionally, a man would sink into the water up to his neck or would disappear altogether into a shell hole under the water. Most of them would reappear and swim their way out. Others would never show up again and the waters swept over their dead bodies.

Only twenty or thirty yards were left to the trenches and the wet faces of the attacking soldiers could be clearly seen. Without any orders from Lukin, his men rose up out of the water and clay, drew themselves over the parapet as well as their tired, aching muscles would allow them, and stumbled forward. They were driven on by an imperative urge. . . It seemed to them that only one or two hundred yards separated them from complete victory.

Lukin suddenly became short of breath and only then did he notice that he too was shouting at the top of his voice. Himself like a spectre, he crawled over the parapet and stumbled after the other spectres in steel helmets. Ulanov, who had not had time to depart, was running beside him, and a few paces away was Kolechkin marching at his full height.

The sun became hot by midday. Lukin's men, there was less than forty of them now, were resting beside the road. They had thrown off their wet greatcoats, and the warmth they had never expected to feel again in this world, embraced their shivering bodies. The battle had moved farther to the west, and the rattle of machine guns and frequent exchanges of artillery fire reached their ears. There was never ceasing traffic on the road some fifty yards away: mounted orderlies, ambulances bringing back wounded, and ammunition columns going up to the front.

Some of the troops were asleep shoulder to shoulder, as if they wanted to stick together even in their sleep. Others could not close an eye, although earlier in the day they had almost collapsed from weariness.

"I brought a Jerry down with a single round!" Ryabyshev shouted to Ulanov. "Honest, I did!" He was standing barefooted, his breeches rolled up over his knees, a lump of sugar in one hand and a piece of bread in the other. His light blue eyes expressed a joyful astonishment. . . .

A great change had come over Ryabyshev. Ulanov, too, experienced the new feeling of inalienable right to live and enjoy all the blessings of life. More than ever before he was now "monarch of all he surveyed" — sky, grass, clouds and trees. He was overjoyed at his liberation from previous encumbrances. He had taken part in heavy fighting, and he was still alive, he had sat in the water for a whole night and felt none the worse for it. Nikolai did not feel that he was invulnerable but was glad that he no longer had to take into consideration the fact that he was mortal. His face, like those of the other soldiers, had grown darker: blood from a scratch had dried on his forehead but he had forgotten all about it. He pushed somebody out of the way to get nearer the fire with his mug of tea, and was not offended when someone else treated him just as unceremoniously.

Dvoyeglazov, gaunt and long armed, was tending the fire, constantly throwing fresh branches of juniper on it.

"The footsloggers have had a tough time—baptism of fire," said Dvoyeglazov stirring the contents of the messtin with a stick.

"I fired kneeling... Aimed and brought him down with one round... Honest, I did!" shouted Ryabyshev who still could not understand how come he had killed the German and not the German him.

"Of course, you did. It's ordinary enough," said Dvoyeglazov.

"And me?!" shouted Ulanov. "He was crawling towards me and I waited. . . ."

"We've all done our bit," agreed Dvoyeglazov. "Get your tea." He took the messtin off the fire and turned his face away from the smoke.

"Where's Kolechkin? Anybody seen Kolechkin?" somebody asked in an alarmed voice.

"Maybe he'll turn up," said Petrovsky, a heavy-set, red-faced soldier who was warming his hands in the steam.

"Savelyev's missing, and Titov, and Klimov, and Kulagin . . ." continued the same voice.

"Stop counting!" said an angry voice.

"Can't we see for ourselves?" added Petrovsky.

"Kulagin didn't get his Fritz. What did he want a living Fritz for? Why couldn't he just keep firing from a distance?" said Ryabyshev with the naive superiority of a man alive over a dead man.

"That was his dream," Dvoyeglazov put in. "Everyone has a dream of his own when he's in battle. . . ."

"Don't we all want the same thing?" asked Petrovsky.

"How can we," answered the Junior Sergeant. "Even our names are different: I have an uncommon name—Dvoyeglazov—others have ordinary names like Ivanov."

"The names are different but we all live under one Soviet power," said Petrovsky.

"That's just what I am saying," said Dvoyeglazov. "We all lead a common life but everybody has his own interests. What were you in civvy street for example?"

"Agronomist, but what has that to do with it?"

"So your job in life was to look after the land . . . and he," Dvoyeglazov pointed to Ryabyshev, "he's still young and imagines some wonderful sort of princess is waiting for him... And I, I have my own interests. I have a wife and family... I want my daughters to have the best of everything. . . ."

He knelt down and turned his red, tearing eyes on Petrovsky.

"I think we ought to live well! I want my daughters to have chocolate and peaches every day."

"It's okay with me," said Petrovsky.

"I kill the Germans but I'm thinking all the time about my family... Everybody thinks that he's fighting for something better for himself . . . and the way it turns out we all fight for everybody else. . . ."

Along the road came a string of wagons loaded with long boxes of shells . . . a company of tommy gunners, marching in formation . . . a group of walking wounded was making its way back to the dressing station... Then came the first German prisoners: seven men in bluish greatcoats were marching in single file. The men in the field, rising to see them better, saw Kolechkin bringing up the rear. He had several tommy guns hanging from his shoulders but he walked easily, his groundsheet thrown over his arm. Loud voices greated the airman and he, recognizing his comrades, turned the Germans off the road into the field. Ulanov jumped up and ran to meet him.

"Halt!" ordered the airman in a dull tenor, and the Germans immediately halted. Nikolai and the others who were not asleep, gathered around the Germans. Kolechkin, his flying jacket torn, his breeches bursting open at the knees, walked calmly over to the fire and took some tea.

The Germans stood at attention. Ulanov was disappointed in the prisoners: they were dirty, wet and ugly with fear.

"I want to exchange seven Fritzes for an aeroplane," said Kolechkin. "Will I make it?"

"I'm sure you will," said Ulanov.

"What a bunch of beauties you've got," somebody said jokingly.

"You've got what you dreamed of, comrade," said Dvoyeglazov. "You'll be flying again. . . ."

Ulanov looked round at his comrades with a glance that seemed to invite them to demand whatever they wanted—this was a day when miracles were being performed.

"Kulagin got his Fritz!" shouted Ryabyshev as though answering his thought.

This was indeed a day of miracles: everybody was getting what he asked for.

There was Kulagin proceeding leisurely along the road, leading a prisoner with his hands tied behind him. The men shouted to Kulagin and he turned toward them.

"Anybody got a smoke?" he asked as he approached.

"Why didn't you finish him off at once?" asked the soldier who offered his tobacco pouch to Kulagin.

"What's the hurry?" asked Kulagin. He seemed calm enough but his hands were trembling as he rolled a cigarette.

The German, short and skinny, with moist black eyes, listened in terror to the incomprehensible speech. He had lost his cap. The troops looked at the prisoner and then turned away, knowing the fate that was in store for him.

"Where's the commissar?" asked Kulagin.

"He's asleep," answered Dvoyeglazov as though he were sorry.

Petrovsky walked up to Kulagin, but was given no chance to say a word.

"I've been hunting for this German a whole year," said Kulagin to Petrovsky not looking at him. "It'll soon be a year that I've been marching across the scorched earth... I'm no longer like a human being... Why d'you want to agitate me?"

"I didn't intend to agitate you," began Petrovsky. "Only it isn't reasonable to do it...."

"I think it's quite reasonable," said Kulagin without raising his eyes.

"No, it is not. Look, there are other prisoners here. D'you want to kill this one in front of them? And suppose one of them escapes and spreads the word... The Fritzes won't surrender any more...."

Kulagin kept silent, apparently lost for an answer.

"I'll take him into the woods," he said at last.

"Bitte," he said going over to his prisoner and pointing to the road. "Bitte..." he repeated with a troubled smile.

"Ja... ja..." babbled the German with a willingness that was overdone.

They moved off and the soldiers looked at them in silence. The German frequently looked round, stumbled and shuffled along sideways. Kulagin drew his head down into his shoulders... There was something pitiful in his hunched up figure, and the mud bespattered greatcoat that pulled up on his shoulders. Both of them finally disappeared in a grove of hazel bushes.

"Grief has made people bitter," said Dvoyeglazov, looking grimly at Kolechkin's seven prisoners. No one replied, their eyes glued to the bushes. Even Ryabyshev had stopped smiling. A minute passed, two, but the shot spelling the death of the German did not come. The tension was unbearable. Ulanov could not stand it any longer and bending over Dvoyeglazov, he said:

"Let's go over there... Let's get over with it...."

Dvoyeglazov only shook his head.

"Vengeance is bad and not to take vengeance is bad," muttered Ryabyshev mournfully.

"And what d'you think?" asked Dvoyeglazov.

Suddenly the bushes parted and the German appeared. He hurried towards the fire, looking behind him all the time. Then came Kulagin. He walked slowly, his rifle lowered.

"Unfasten him, somebody," said Kulagin in a tired voice. He sat down and wiped his pale face with his hand. "I couldn't do it."

"Good chap!" shouted Dvoyeglazov. "A true Russian...."

"I just couldn't raise my hand," said Kulagin shamefacedly and lay face down in the grass.

Dvoyeglazov stood over him for a moment and then turned to the Germans.

"What a man you're tormenting. Beasts! Killing you isn't enough."

After midnight the GOC awoke and was filled with an impatient desire to get up and go out. His eyes wandered restlessly over the ceilling, over the walls of squared logs, and over the painted floorboards that gleamed where the lamp cast a circle of light. An imminent danger seemed hovering nearby and a sudden premonition brought warning of its presence... Ryabinin looked at the girl seated by the table. Her head was resting on the palms of her hands, the fingers digging into her cheeks.

"I must get away from here," thought the general, and he was horrified at the idea that perhaps it was already too late, that he had slept through everything. He realized that he was dying, and at first it rather relieved him, for it explained everything so simply. He scarcely felt any

pain at all but the whole lower half of his body was absolutely numb. Ryabinin felt he had lost all awareness of future, of a reality of a new day or a new year for him. He wished to flee this room because he knew that he would never leave it alive.

For some time the general busied himself getting accustomed to the idea that he was a man without a morrow, or rather he was trying to imagine the consequences of such a state. The country he had defended, the Party in which he had grown up kept moving away from him. They went on with the battle while he had remained behind. The consciousness of this sudden loneliness was so great that for a moment it overwhelmed him.

"Nurse," he called, and his own voice had a new and unaccustomed sound to it. In that world without a future in which Ryabinin now found himself everything sounded and looked differently.

Anya jumped up, came up to him, bent over and waited while the general stared at her with avid interest, knowing that she would live after he was gone.

"Yes, C-c-c-omrade General?" she said.

The general did not reply, and Anya noticed on his face, shining wet with perspiration, a look of such intense curiosity that she was frightened. Ryabinin lowered his eyes and did not say a word. His life stream had met an obstacle and had turned back, to the past. . . The general recalled all the losses he had suffered: his mother, Lenin, his wife, friends. . . It was as if he were pushed towards them, and in cutting himself off from the living, he was nearer to those he had long since lost. Swift pictures passed before the general's eyes—not of acquisitions that had made him happy but of losses he had sustained, of those that could never be forgotten. This provided the bitter solace which the dying man needed. That which was happening to him now was no different from what had happened to the people who had been dear to him.

Scared by the general's long silence, Anya slowly straightened up.

"Do you want anything?" she said loudly.

"What time is it?" asked the general.

"Half past one," the girl answered quickly, glancing at her wristwatch.

"Thank you," said Ryabinin.

He now felt that he had gathered himself well together as he always did in moments of danger, during heavy fighting or in other moments of trial. This was a normal reaction of his will power and it did not desert him now either. And the general turned to face this, his last, trial. He looked coldly, almost disdainfully, at the distant corner. There stood a long, low, four-legged iron stove built like a dachshund. It cast a shadow on the wooden wall. Beside the tiny door of the stove lay finely cut spills of firewood. The general looked at the stove as though that which he was preparing to meet would come out of it. The long minutes passed but nothing in that corner changed. . . .

Anya stepped back and sat down on the chair beside the bed. With difficulty the general raised his head.

"Let me get dressed," he ordered.

"What?" asked the girl.

"I want to get dressed, quickly," repeated Ryabinin. "Here I am dying," he thought, "and the Germans are still in Vyazma." He hesitated. "I'm dying and victory is nowhere near at hand," the general mentally protested, demanding either life or an immediate victory over the enemy. His alarm grew, and the voice of duty roaring within him drowned the weak objections of intellect. The old soldier was challenging death itself, refusing to yield to it. . . .

"B-b-but how are you g-g-going to d-dress?" asked Anya.

"Hurry up!" said Ryabinin. His fingers pulled at the blanket and it wrinkled up showing his huge bandaged leg. To him death, his death, seemed treason towards the living. . . He had to contact them immediately, to see them, encourage, instruct and demand an account from them. He had to hurry while he was still with his army, in order to leave behind all that he knew and was capable of. . . .

"My tunic. . . There it is," the general pointed to it. There was so much accustomed authority in his voice that the girl did not dare disobey. She took his tunic from the back of the chair and gave it to him. Satisfied, he dropped back on the pillow.

He did not try to put it on, content to leave it lying on his chest. He seemed to have forgotten it, but he would not let it slip out of his fingers.

"We're going," he said. "Call somebody. . . ."

"All right," whispered Anya.

"Tell them to start the car."

The general did not appear to see the

adjutant when he came into the room, smoothing down the tangled hair on his head. Looking distraughtly at the captain, Ryabinin did not speak to him—it was as though instructions had been issued and all he had to do now was to wait. The captain looked at the general and also kept silent. The sound of a motor horn came from the outside and the general smiled; then he half-closed his eyes against the head wind. . . .

. . . Two black walls of trees swept past him. The road was scarcely visible in the faint rays of the blackout headlights—ruts filled with liquid mud, an occasional tree sticking out of the ground. . . The car overtook a column of troops, the driver slowed up and passed it. Faces scarcely visible in the darkness turned towards the general, the flat bayonet on a self-loading rifle flashing up occasionally. A sense of triumph such as follows a successful move, filled the general. The danger that had just threatened his army was now past, for he was with the army again. His regiments had been redeployed farther to the west and he was hurrying forward with them. The driver looked enquiringly at the general—did he not want to halt the jeep?

"No, Vassya, no," said Ryabinin quite clearly and Anya Manevich ran over to him. Shuddering, she covered his dead leg with the blanket.

. . . They passed the forest and an undulating plain, at sunrise, opened up before the general. Occasional stars were still twinkling through the haze. The road turned sharply, and, ahead of him, along the semicircle of the horizon, a solid mass of troops, guns and wagons was moving. . . Motors were roaring, wagon drivers were cursing, horses neighed. . . "That's Bogdanov on the move," thought Ryabinin with a kindly smile. "A fine commander, bit young still . . . and a bit too soft—that's bad."

Anya bent over the general and wiped his forehead, pendent cheeks and massive jaw with a handkerchief. The general's eyes were filled with gratitude to the girl. Her sudden appearance on the huge open plain did not astonish him.

She passed the corner of the handkerchief over the general's lips and this kindness which the general had done without for so long, which he had thought he no longer needed, moved him.

"Thank you," he said.

"You should have called me before," Anya reproached him. "I'm not sleeping. D-d-don't be afraid, C-c-comrade General!"

"I'm not afraid," he said simply and looked into the corner. Everything was still the same as it was before: the black iron dog stood on its four legs, its shadow stretched out to the wall.

"What is there to be afraid of?" asked the general.

"Nothing," said Anya.

The GOC looked at his adjutant, and at last recognized him. . . He could see tears in his eyes, but had no time to console him. He was in a greater hurry than ever before. His befogged eyes narrowed and he no longer saw the room. . . .

. . . Horsemen were rushing past on the left and on the right of Ryabinin, and long jumping shadows flitted across the steppes ahead of them. At times they were hidden by a floating red cloud—the dust they left behind them hid the sun. A man in a leather jacket and a faded green cap who was riding in front turned round; his young, lively face was brilliantly lit up.

"Sergei Mironovich!" exclaimed the GOC joyfully, "Where are you going?"

Kirov, smiling, pointed toward the steppes with his head. . . There, in the sunburnt grass, flashed the orange-coloured ribbon of the Volga; beyond the river he could see the white walls of a city. . . .

Anya Manevich and the adjutant listened with sad curiosity.

"They served in Astrakhan together," muttered the captain.

. . . The horses rushed on along the bank of the river. Its calm surface was faintly ruffled by the wind, the sky darkened but in the distance the cupolas of the city flamed up like torches. . . .

Anya bent over the general.

"You're lying too low, I'll fix your pillows," she said.

"All right," agreed the general tersely, and marched on farther.

. . . A cloud of dust hung over the road and Ryabinin saw the dust-grey faces, dried lips and wet backs of soldiers marching. . . There were red ribbons on the caps of the soldiers, on their tunics and on the barrels of their rifles that had been carefully wrapped in rags so they would not be soiled. . . .

Ryabinin's breathing was becoming irregular, his face was noticeably paler. Anya whispered to the adjutant and he

immediately ran out of the room. One after the other, Yuriev, Voloshin and Lukonin appeared. They entered on tiptoe, the commissar stood by the table and Yuriev went over to the bed. The general did not notice them. He was marching across a wide, slowly rising field. . . .

Ahead of him and all around were strips of gold which he crossed as easily as if they had been sun rays. In astonishment, he went higher and higher, and the rays crossed over him, covered his face, blinded him and joined together behind him. Suddenly the general ceased to wonder, realizing that this was victory, complete victory.

Yuriev took the lamp from the table and bent low over the general. The dying man's eyelids flickered, he thought he was looking at the sun. And thus looking at the sun, General Ryabinin ceased to live.

Masha said good-bye to Gorbunov at that same station where she had detrained a week before. The hospital train was being loaded hurriedly and they did not have time to speak about those important things that are always left till the last minute. In the ambulance on the way to the station they were both silent, as though frightened at the idea that they must part. Gorbunov either smiled guiltily or, thinking of something, would start whistling a tune. "How badly he whistles," thought Masha, but she was more touched by it than irritated. She never tired of finding in Gorbunov, as he in her, new qualities and characteristics that were especially attractive now that they belonged to each other.

The white-painted coach of the hospital train was crowded and other nurses took over the patient. Masha got all her wounded to their beds and then hurried back to Gorbunov. He was lying on an upper berth and all he could see was the pale face and thin fingers gripping the edge of his berth.

"Write to me," he said softly.

"And you write too," answered Masha without a smile.

Only a minute or two were left. Someone had already ordered everybody off the train.

"Masha, I shall expect letters from you," repeated the lieutenant.

"All right," she answered.

They were again silent, afraid that they would not have time to comfort each other, or at least to admit that neither of them could be comforted.

Gorbunov squeezed her fingers until she gasped. His lips moved and Masha stood immobile, expecting words from him that would be more powerful than the grief of parting.

"Write to me," muttered the lieutenant.

The wheels of the carriage began to move and the faint banging of buffers ran through the whole train.

"Good-bye," shouted Masha and ran to the door. For the last time he saw her distraught face on the platform by the door. The white carriage, like the cabin of a ship, swayed slightly as the train moved off. . . Gorbunov pulled the curtains back from the window and could see nothing but a piece of the sky and the water tower that was floating away from him.

Masha was riding back in the empty ambulance, sitting on a stretcher with her back to the driver's cabin. A battered bucket rattled back and forth on the wooden floor. The girl felt so weak that she did not even try to put it back in its place. It still seemed to her that she and Gorbunov had not said those words which must infallibly keep them for each other. She did not realize that she was now worried by the distance that separated them, by the vicissitudes of war, by the forgetfulness of human hearts. . . .

Nikolai learned that the battalion would attack in the evening. Some of the soldiers were packing their bags, some were finishing off letters while others were cleaning their rifles or loading submachine-gun drums. The sergeant major issued iron rations—dried sausage, biscuits and sugar. Then every soldier got two hand grenades which resembled small pineapples. Ulanov, following the example of the others hung them from his belt. "More fighting," thought the youngster and he shivered at the thought of fresh trials to come. At the same time, however, he felt a certain satisfaction. "I've played the fool long enough," he said to himself thoughtfully. . . They discovered that there were not enough field dressings to go round and Nikolai was sent to the dressing station for them. The sun was sinking behind the thatched roofs and the air had turned noticeably yellow when he splashed his way back.

From the distance he could hear music and when he entered the yard where the men were quartered he found them dancing.

Ten or twelve soldiers formed a small circle. Two others were dancing in the middle—Ryabyshev and another private, a young, squat fellow in well-worn boots. He walked mincingly, waving his sweat-stained cap like a kerchief. Ryabyshev, as he danced behind him, was almost squatting on his heels, his strong legs flashing back and forth. The upper part of his body hardly stirred and his arms were stretched out straight on either side. When the shorter dancer turned to his partner, Ryabyshev began to pirouette: his big round face bore only the ghost of a smile. . . .

"What a healthy-looking brute," said Kulagin, and there was respect in his voice.

"Strength of the soil," said Dvoyeglazov.

The young soldier who was dancing the woman's part winked and rolled his shoulders under his faded tunic. The onlookers chuckled, more in encouragement than approval—their attention was fixed on Ryabyshev. A dark patch of sweat appeared on his back as broad as a barn door, his smooth damp forehead was shining but his breathing was still almost inaudible—he seemed able to dance forever.

Ulanov handed over the dressings and went out onto the porch. Kolechkin, sitting on the railing, was playing his accordion and gazing indifferently somewhere above the heads of the dancers.

Nikolai's attention was attracted by a group of soldiers in the street. They looked over the fence into the courtyard but did not venture in. . . Some of the troops threw off their packs and sat on them. Others stood still, waiting for something, and did not even unsling their rifles.

Nikolai walked across the yard and out of the gate. His hands thrust in his pockets, he stood for some time in silence watching the soldiers. "Reinforcement for us," he thought and turned away, too busy with his own thoughts to be very interested in the newcomers.

"Are we going to stand here long, sonny?" a soldier who was already getting on in years asked Nikolai. His crumpled greatcoat was all screwed up and his valise hung down below his waist on long braces.

"Don't be in a hurry, dad, there'll be enough lying down before long," answered Ulanov absently.

"It's true!" The soldier's red, wrinkled face screwed up in an ingratiating smile. "They brought us here, told us to wait. . . ."

From the yard came the sounds of music and the fast, rhythmic trample of feet. Most likely somebody else had begun dancing, there was a burst of laughter from the crowd and this noise eventually brought Ulanov out of his pensive mood.

"You sit down, dad, rest up a bit. . . There's still a long way to go," he said in a friendly way.

"Maybe we'll move off soon," objected the soldier hesitatingly.

"If they send you, you'll go. . . Let me help you get that pack off. . . ."

In the evening the battalion fell in on the street. Lukin walked along the lines inspecting every soldier, sometimes stopping to make a remark. The commissar himself looked taller and smarter. He was wearing new boots and a new belt that creaked with his every movement. The commissar halted in front of Ulanov.

"Have you slept and washed?" he asked.

"Yes, Comrade Senior Political Instructor," answered Nikolai in a loud voice, glad to be with the commissar again.

"Good for you," said Lukin and walked on.

Kulagin, Ryabyshev and Kolechkin marched in one rank. The lad studied their profiles as he marched: bony and unkindly, that was Kulagin; snub-nosed and rosy-cheeked even in the twilight—Ryabyshev; fine featured and meditative—Kolechkin. Ahead of them marched Dvoyeglazov, narrow-shouldered, towering above his companions. Beside him Nikolai saw the man from the reinforcement company whose acquaintance he had made a short time before. As he marched, the man took off his cap and wiped his perspiring, close-cropped head with the palm of his hand.

It was quite dark when the troops left the village. The sky was overcast and the road was faintly white between the dark fields. As always with the beginning of a journey this road of long marches and hard-won victories seemed endless to Ulanov.

Translated by George Hanna

BORIS POLEVOY

THE STORY OF A REAL MAN

(Continued)

The first part of this story was published in Soviet Literature *No. 4, 1947.*

Senior Lieu'enant Meresyev is a fighter pilot who was shot down by an enemy plane. For eleven days he crawled with smashed feet through enemy-occupied territory living on bark and pine cones.

He was picked up by the partisans almost dead from exhaustion and then brought to a Moscow hospital by plane; there his both feet were amputated above the ankle.

Meresyev decided that even without his feet he would go back to flying. When he got artificial limbs he trained himself to walk without crutches—a feat requiring superhuman persistence to overcome the pain and fatigue.

In the summer of 1942, after four months in hospital, he was sent to a sanatorium to convalesce. While he was there he practised running, played croquet and volleyball and even learned to dance.

The Germans were approaching Stalingrad. Meresyev's sweetheart Olga, volunteered to work on the construction of Stalingrad's defences.

An army medical commission visited the sanatorium near Moscow to select airmen from amongst the convalescents who could be sent back to the front. Meresyev decided that it was time for him to get back to his unit.

Alexei felt a chill in the pit of his stomach, but all the same he entered the room with a brisk step, gay and smiling. The commission were sitting at a large table, Colonel Mirovolsky of the Medical Corps in the middle. Away to the side, at a small table piled high with records sat Zinochka, dainty and pretty in her starched white smock, with coppery strands of hair peeping coquettishly from under her cap. She handed Alexei his case history giving him a quiet pressure of her fingers.

"Well, young man," said the colonel, screwing up his eyes, "take off your tunic."

It was not for nothing that Alexei had spent so much time on sports and sun-bathing. The doctor examined his strong muscular body with admiration.

Meresyev passed all the tests with ease, his hand grip was one and a half times above average, and his lung capacity test sent the indicator up to the top. His blood pressure was normal and his nerves excellent. Finally, he gave such a tug to the steel handle of the strength measure that he broke the apparatus.

"Airman?" asked the colonel, pleased, slumping in his armchair, prepared to record his findings.

"Yes."

"Fighter?"

"Yes."

"Well, go on and fight, then. Right now we need men like you! But wait a minute, what were you in hospital for?"

Alexei felt that everything was lost now, but the colonel was already reading his record, and his kindly face lengthened in surprise.

"Amputation of both feet... What lunacy's this? A mistake, or what? Well, why don't you speak?"

"No, it's not a mistake," said Alexei quietly and very slowly, as though each word were a step towards the scaffold.

The doctor and the whole commission stared suspiciously at this strong, splendidly developed, swift-moving man.

"Turn up your trouser legs," the colonel ordered impatiently.

Alexei paled. He glanced helplessly at Zinochka, then slowly lifted the legs of his trousers and stood before the table showing his artificial limbs.

Germans' Retreat from Novgorod

By Kukryniksy

"Then what are you taking up our time for? You don't think you can go back to flying now, do you?" the colonel asked at last.

"I don't think I can, I know I can!" said Alexei softly, and a stubborn light flashed in his Gipsy-like eyes.

"You're mad! Without feet?"

"Yes. And I'll fly, too!" Meresyev replied calmly. He thrust his hand into the pocket of his shabby flying coat and pulled out a neatly folded cutting from a magazine. "You see, he flew without one foot, so why can't I do it without both?"

The colonel read the cutting, then looked at the airman with surprise and respect.

"But you'd need the devil's own business of training for that. You can see for yourself, he trained for ten years. You'd have to learn to use your feet like real ones," said the colonel softening.

At this point Alexei received unexpected support. Zinochka jumped up from behind the table, folded her hands on her breast imploringly and said blushing till tiny beads of sweat stood out on her temples:

"Comrade Colonel, you should see him dance! Better than any of the others on their own feet! Honestly, he does!"

"Dance! What the devil—?" The colonel shrugged his shoulders and exchanged glances with the other members of the commission.

Alexei eagerly seized upon Zinochka's idea.

"Don't reject me yet. Just come this evening when we're dancing. You'll see for yourself that I can fly."

A special dance had been arranged as a farewell to the two hundred volunteers who were leaving the sanatorium for active service. A military band had come from Moscow on a lorry; their music rattled the windows of the houses and the porches. The indefatigable airmen, sweat trickling down their faces, vied with others in agile folk dances and all the time Alexei was with them, dancing gaily, lightly, nimbly. He and his partner were the best couple on the dance floor.

Colonel Mirovolsky, sitting by an open window with a mug of cold beer, never took his eyes off Meresyev and his red-headed partner. He was a doctor, more, he was an army doctor. He knew from countless cases the difference between artificial legs and real ones. And now, following the sturdy, dark airman skillfully leading his dainty little partner, he could not rid himself of the thought that there must be some sort of a complicated conjuring trick. Finally, after the airman had danced the "Barinya" in the midst of a clapping circle, whooping, slapping his hands on his hips, he went to the colonel, gay and perspiring, and the latter shook his hand with the utmost respect. Meresyev said nothing, but his eyes, fixed on those of the colonel implored, demanded an answer.

"Well, you know yourself I haven't the right to send you straight to a unit. I'll give you a certificate stating that in my opinion you'll be able to fly with the necessary training. In a word, you can consider that you've got my vote," said the colonel.

Alexei spent the night before he was to go to the Replacements Officer tossing about on his divan wide awake. At dawn he rose, washed and shaved, came to the office quite early in the morning and was the first to approach the staff major who was to decide his fate. From the start he took a dislike to this man. He spent a long time fussing about his table, as though he did not see Alexei at all, taking out folders of papers and arranging them in front of him, telephoned to somebody, explained in detail to the secretary just how he wanted the records numbered, and then disappeared somewhere and did not return for some time. Meanwhile, Alexei had come to detest his long face with its clean-shaven cheeks, red lips, and narrow forehead rising to a bald head. At last the major raised his eyes to the impatient Alexei.

"You want to speak to me, Comrade Senior Lieutenant?" he asked in a dignified, self-confident bass.

Meresyev explained his business. The major asked the secretary to bring his records and sat waiting for them, legs flung out, busily picking his teeth with a toothpick, shielding his mouth with his left hand. When the papers arrived, he began studying the record. At one point he hastily gestured towards a chair as much as to say: sit down, why are you standing—and then immersed himself in the papers again. After reading the last sheet, he asked:

"Well, and what do you want?"

"I want to go to a fighter regiment."

The major leaned back in his chair, stared in surprise at the airman who was still standing in front of him. His thick brows rose still higher on his smooth, fleshy forehead.

"But you can't fly?"

"I can and I will. Send me to a training school for a test," Meresyev almost shouted, and there was such indomitable resolution in his voice that the officers sitting at the other tables raised their heads to find out what it was that this handsome, dark fellow was demanding so obstinately.

"But listen, how can you fly without feet? It's ridiculous. Such things don't happen. And who'll permit it?" The major was sure that this was some madman.

Squinting at Alexei's angry face, at his burning, furious eyes, he tried to speak as gently as possible.

"Such things have happened," said Alexei obstinately; he took a carefully kept magazine clipping from his pocketbook and laid it on the table before the major.

The officers at the other tables had already stopped working and were following the conversation with interest. One of them came to the major, asked for matches and looked hard at Meresyev. The major's eyes scanned the article.

"It can't serve as a document, really! We've got our regulations. They lay down all the physical qualifications for the air force. I can't let you fly a plane if you lack even two fingers, let alone two feet. Here's your magazine clipping. I respect your wish, but. . . ."

Meresyev felt that in another instant he would hurl the inkwell at that shining, bald forehead; instead he ejaculated dully:

"And that?"

He laid his last argument on the table—the paper with the signature of the medical corps colonel. The major picked it up dubiously. It was made out correctly, with the stamp and seal of a medical department; and it was signed by a doctor respected throughout the air force. The major read it and became noticeably more amenable. No, this was no madman. This amazing fellow really intended to fly. He had even managed somehow to convince the colonel, a man whose prestige stood high.

"All the same, no matter how much I might like to, I can't do it," sighed the major, pushing away Meresyev's record. "The colonel can write what he wants, but we've got our regulations, clear and definite, and we can't depart from them. . . Who'll answer for a breach of regulations—the colonel or myself?"

Meresyev looked with hatred at this well-fed, self-satisfied man, sitting there so sure of himself, so polite, with his clean collar beneath his neat tunic, his hairy hands with their well manicured, large, ugly nails. How could you make him see it? How could a man like that understand? Probably he had never heard a shot in his life. . . Restraining himself with all his might, he asked dully:

"And what am I to do, then?"

"If you insist, I can send you to the commission in the personnel department," and the major shrugged his shoulders. "Only I warn you—it'll be a waste of time."

"Well, send me to the commission, damn it," rasped Meresyev, and slumped heavily onto his chair.

This was the beginning of his wanderings from department to department. Weary people up to the eyes in work heard him out, surprised, sympathetic, impressed, then shrugged their shoulders helplessly. And after all, what could they do? There were regulations, strict regulations, signed by headquarters; there was the tradition of decades; and how could they be broken especially in a case where there could be no question of doubt. Everybody was sorry for the indefatigable cripple dreaming of fighting, nobody had the heart to give the final refusal, so he was sent from department to department, from one commission to another.

Meresyev no longer raged at refusals, at the didactic tone, the humiliating sympathy and patronage against which his whole proud spirit rebelled. He learned to keep a hold on himself, learned the manner of a petitioner, and although he received two or three refusals every day, would not lose hope. The page from the magazine and the colonel's finding became so shabby from being constantly taken out of his pocket and replaced,

that they tore at the folds and he had to paste them together again on tissue paper.

Meresyev was the first to be summoned before the commission. The huge, pasty colonel of the medical corps, who had at last returned from an assignment, was in the chair. He recognized Alexei at once and even rose to meet him.

"What, they won't have you! Yes, lad, yours is a difficult case. It means going against regulations. And how can you do that?" he sympathized benevolently.

He did not even examine Alexei, but wrote on his application: "Personnel Department. Can be sent to the Flying School for a test." Alexei took this paper and went straight to the Personnel Department. He was not admitted to the general. He would have lost his temper, but the general's adjutant, a slender youthful captain with black moustache, looked so merry, kindly and friendly that Meresyev, who had never been able to endure "archangels", as he called staff officers, sat down beside his table and to his own surprise began telling the captain his story in detail. He was often interrupted by the telephone. Every now and then the captain had to jump up and run into the general's office. But when he returned, he immediately sat down again opposite Meresyev, and fixing him with his naive, childlike eyes shining with curiosity, admiration and even incredulity, he would urge him on with:

"Well, and after that?" Then he would suddenly fling out his hands and ask in amazement: "Honest? Is that so? Well, that's the limit!"

When Meresyev told of his wanderings from department to department, the captain, who despite his youthful appearance was something of an authority on organizational matters, cried angrily:

"The bastards! They've been driving you around for nothing. You're fine, oh, I just don't know how to put it, you're a grand lad! . . Only they're right—men don't fly without feet."

"They do. . . Look. . ." And Meresyev spread out the clipping from the magazine, the colonel's findings and instruction.

"Yes, but how'll you do it? You're crazy! You know the saying—you can't dance without feet."

Meresyev would most certainly have been offended with anybody else, and perhaps would have lost his temper and said a few strong words. But the captain's animated face expressed such good will, that instead, Alexei jumped up and retorted with boyish mischief:

"Can't you, though?" and suddenly shot off in a spirited folk dance right there in the reception room.

The captain watched him in delight, then without a word seized his papers and disappeared into the office.

It was a long time before he reappeared. The airman, listening to the muffled sound of two voices the other side of the door, felt his whole body contract with the terrible tension, his heart thudding swiftly, as though he were making a steep dive on a swift plane.

The captain emerged from the office beaming and satisfied.

"Here you are," he said. "Of course the general wouldn't hear a word about sending you to fly. But see what he's written here—assigned to Aerodrome Servicing Battalion without any decrease of pay or allowances. Got it? Without any decrease. . . ."

The captain broke off, bewildered, seeing in Alexei's face not the expected delight, but only indignation.

"ASB? Like hell! Just get this once and for all—it's not my stomach or my uniform I'm worrying about. I'm an airman, will you understand that, I want to fly, to fight. . . Why can't anybody see it! Could anything be simpler. . . ."

The captain was thunderstruck. A stroke of luck like that, anybody else would have begun to dance again, and this fellow. . . A crazy guy. But the captain's liking for that crazy guy increased still more. He felt the utmost sympathy for him, he wanted to help him in his impossible wish at all costs. Suddenly an idea flashed into his mind. He winked at Meresyev, beckoned him with a finger and whispered, glancing at the office door:

"The general's done all he can. He can't do anything more. Honest! They'd think he'd gone mad—to send a man without feet to fly. Go right up to the big cheese, he's the only one that can do anything."

Half an hour later Meresyev, for whom the friendly captain had procured a pass, was pacing nervously the carpeted reception room. Why had he not thought of it before! This was where he should have come right at the beginning, instead of losing so much time. Win or lose... They said that the Marshal had once been a first-class ace himself. He ought to understand! Anyhow, he wouldn't send a fighter pilot to the ASB.

Generals and colonels were sitting decorously in the reception room. They were talking in low voices, some were evidently excited, many were smoking, and only the senior lieutenant paced back and forth, back and forth along the strip of the carpet with his strange, springy walk. When Alexei's turn came, he walked smartly up to the desk where a young major with a round, open face was sitting.

"You want the Marshal himself, Comrade Senior Lieutenant?"

"Yes, I have very important business with him personally."

"But perhaps, all the same, you could tell me your business? Sit down, sit down. Smoke?" He held out an open cigarette case to Meresyev.

Alexei was not a smoker, but for some reason he took a cigarette, crushed it in his fingers, laid it on the table, then suddenly, as with the captain, began to pour out all his misfortunes. That day he definitely changed his opinion of "archangels", guarding the generals' portals. The major listened to him with friendly sympathy and attention. He read the article from the magazine, and studied the finding. Encouraged by this, Meresyev jumped up, quite forgetting where he was, wanting to demonstrate again how he could dance . . . and nearly spoiled everything. The office door opened quickly, and there emerged a tall, thin, black-haired man whom Alexei recognized immediately from his photographs. He was fastening his greatcoat as he walked and saying something to the general who followed him. He was very occupied and did not even notice Meresyev.

"I'm going to the Kremlin," he said to the major, glancing at his watch. "Order a night plane for Stalingrad at six. Taking off from Verkhnaya Pogromnaya," and disappeared as quickly as he had appeared.

The major immediately ordered the aeroplane, then remembered Alexei and flung out his hands.

"No luck. We're off and you'll have to wait. Have you anywhere to live?"

The swarthy face of the unusual applicant, a moment before resolute, determined, now showed such weary disappointment that the major changed his mind.

"All right... I know our chief, he'll do just the same."

He wrote several words on an official form, slipped it into an envelope, wrote on the outside: Chief of the Assignments Department, and handed it to Meresyev wringing his hand.

"Best of luck!"

The paper read: "Lieutenant Meresyev has been to HQ. He should be treated with every consideration. He is to have all necessary assistance in returning to active flying service."

An hour later the captain with the small moustache saw Meresyev in his chief's office. The burly old general with shaggy, fierce-looking brows, read the paper, and raised merry blue eyes to the airman.

"So you've been there already... Not wasted any time! You were offended at being sent to ASB? Ha-ha-ha!" and he laughed loudly. "Grand lad! There's a real airman. Doesn't want to go to ASB, he's insulted... Fine!... Well, and what am I to do with you now, eh? You'll crash, and they'll take my head off, why, they'd say, did you send him, you old fool. Though for that matter, who can say, our lads have given the world quite a few surprises in this war... Give me that paper."

In an illegible handwriting, the words tailing off unfinished, the general wrote across the paper in blue pencil: "To be sent to training school." Meresyev seized the paper with trembling hands. He read it standing there by the table, read it again and again out on the landing, then downstairs standing by the sentry who took his pass, then again in the tram, and finally, standing in the rain on the pavement. Of all the people in the world, only he could know the meaning and the cost of those few carelessly written words.

It was a period of intense activity at the training school by a small aerodrome on the outskirts of Moscow.

There was plenty of work for aircraft during the Stalingrad battle. There were continuous skirmishes developing into real battles in the murky skies over the Volga stronghold which were never clear of the smoke from burning buildings and explosions. The losses on both sides were very heavy. Fighting Stalingrad continually called to the rear for airmen, airmen, airmen. . . So the training school was working at full pressure, preparing pilots discharged from hospital, and others from the rear who had come from civil aviation to fly the new fighting craft. Training planes hovered round the small, cramped aerodrome like flies round a cluttered kitchen table. They hummed overhead from dawn to dusk, and there was never a moment when somebody was not taking off or landing on the field, crisscrossed with wheel ruts.

The training school chief of staff, a small, very stout, red-cheeked man with eyes inflamed from lack of sleep, looked angrily at Meresyev as though to say: "What the devil's brought you here? Haven't I enough worry without you?!" He practically snatched the documents out of his hand.

"He'll pick on me because of my feet and throw me out," thought Meresyev, looking apprehensively at the brown stubble on the lieutenant colonel's unshaven cheeks. But at that moment two telephones rang simultaneously. Holding one hand set snuggled between his shoulder and his ear, he rumbled something angrily into the other, while running a cursory eye over Meresyev's papers. Probably the only thing he read was the general's finding, because without even laying down the hand set, he wrote beneath it: "Enroll in third training detachment, Lieutenant Naumov."

Although Alexei was faced with many inconveniences and difficulties, although rations were poor owing to the constant stream of people passing through the school and the resultant confusion, so that the men began thinking of supper as soon as dinner was over; although the pipes had burst in the crowded school building used for quarters, and throughout the first frosty night Alexei shivered under his warm leather coat—nevertheless, in the midst of all this inconvenience and bustle he felt like a fish thrown back into the water after gasping on dry land. He was thoroughly in his element, and even the inconveniences of this bivouac kind of life only served to remind him that he was close to the realization of his dreams.

The familiar surroundings: familiar people in faded and worn leather coats and flying boots, sunburned, hoarse and jolly; the familiar atmosphere, the smell of petrol, the roar of warming engines and the even, calm hum of planes in the air; the technicians with their dirty faces and oily overalls, run off their feet; the bad-tempered, sunburned instructors; the rosy-cheeked girls from the meteorological shed; the grey smoke clouds floating in the HQ cottage; the humming of buzzers, and the sharp ring of telephones; the shortage of spoons in the mess—taken as souvenirs by men going to the front; the school newspaper written in coloured pencil, with caricatures of pilots at the controls dreaming of their girls; the soft brown mud of the airfield, crisscrossed with wheel tracks; the cheery talk flavoured with jokes and flying terms—it was all his native element.

Meresyev recovered his joy of living, and that reckless devil-may-care attitude which all fighter pilots have. He held himself erect, smartly returned salutes and snapped his heels together on meeting senior officers.

On his first day Meresyev sought out Lieutenant Naumov, the third detachment instructor, to whom he had been assigned. Naumov, a small, very active man with a large head and long arms was running about in "T" district, staring up at a tiny plane in the sky, raging at the pilot.

"The blockhead! The lump of . . . er . . . gold! 'Been a fighter!' Who does he think he's going to take in?"

In reply to Meresyev's greeting, when he introduced himself according to all regulations, his future instructor merely pointed upwards.

"See that? A 'fighter,' the terror of the air, twisting about like a piece of paper in the wind!"

Alexei took a fancy to this instructor at once. He liked men of that kind, a bit crazy in every-day matters, heart and soul in his job, the kind a capable and keen man could soon get on with. He made a few practical observations about the pilot in question. The small lieutenant turned and looked him over from head to foot.

"My detachment? What name? What have you flown? How long since you were up?"

Alexei was far from sure that the lieutenant even heard his replies. He was staring up again, shading his eyes with his hand, and shaking his fist.

"The dolt!.. Look how he banks! Like an elephant in a dining room."

He told Alexei to report at the beginning of the flying day and promised to "give him a trial."

"And now go and rest. Need it after the journey. Had anything to eat? In all this muddle they may forget to feed you... The jumping Jack! Wait till he lands, I'll give him fighter pilot!"

Alexei did not go to rest, especially as the aerodrome, although swept by a sharp wind, was warmer than the chilly classroom. He found a shoemaker in the ASB, gave him his week's tobacco ration and asked him to make two small buckle straps, according to his precise instructions, in order to fasten his feet to the pedals. The shoemaker asked for the price of a drink to help speed up the order, but promised to make a job of it. Then Meresyev returned to the aerodrome, and until darkness fell and the last machine had landed and been fastened down, he watched the flying as though these were not just ordinary training flights, but some first-class contest. He was not analyzing the flying, he was simply drinking in the atmosphere of the aerodrome, its hustle and bustle, the constant roar of engines, the dull thud of the rocket-gun, the smell of petrol and oil. He was filled with rapturous excitement, and the thought never even entered his head that tomorrow he might lose control of the plane, tomorrow there might be a catastrophe.

The airfield was still empty when he arrived there the next day. Engines were warming up, stoves were belching flames, and the mechanics tightening screws. There were the familiar morning shouts:

"Ready!"

"Contact!"

"Contact it is!"

Somebody bawled at Alexei for wandering about the field so early. He replied with a joke, while for some reason or other the words kept ringing in his head: "Contact it is! Contact it is! Contact it is!" Finally the aircraft, bumping and lurching clumsily with shaking wings, crawled to the start, the mechanics holding the wing struts. Naumov had already arrived and was smoking a cigarette-end, so short that it looked as though he were drawing smoke from his own brown fingers.

"Got here?" he said, not returning Alexei's report. "Well, that's fine. Get into the back cabin of No. 9, I'll be right along. We'll soon find out what kind of bird you are."

He stood there smoking the last of his cigarette in short puffs, while Alexei made for the aeroplane. He wanted to fasten his feet before the instructor arrived. He was a grand fellow all right, but who could tell, maybe he would jib, refuse to try him out, raise a row? Meresyev crawled over the slippery wing, and convulsively seized the side of the cabin. In his excitement, he could not throw his leg over the side into the cabin, and the thin-faced, melancholy-looking mechanic, staring at him in surprise, decided: "Drunk, the son-of-a-bitch."

But at last Alexei managed to throw his stiff foot into the cabin, dragged the other one after him with a tremendous effort, and slumped down heavily into the seat. The first thing he did was to fasten his feet to the pedals with his straps. They were well made. Meresyev firmly attached his artificial feet onto the pedals, so that he felt them secure just as in his boyhood he had felt in his well-fastened skates.

The instructor's head appeared inside the cabin.

"See here, friend, you're not drunk at this hour, are you? Let me smell your breath."

Not smelling anything, the instructor waved his fist at the mechanic.

"Ready!"

"Contact!"

"Contact it is!"

The engine snorted several times, and then the even beat of pistons was heard. Meresyev gave a joyful exclamation and mechanically reached out for the throttle, but immediately heard a voice through the speaking tube:

"Don't rush in before your elders."

The instructor himself opened the throttle, the engine roared and the aircraft began bumping over the field. The plane took the air at a steep an-

gle, as Naumov pulled the joystick of this tiny machine, everywhere a subject of army jokes and everywhere regarded with affectionate respect as an old, eccentric but trustworthy comrade-in-arms—it was in one of those machines that every airman had once learned his job.

Through the slanting mirror the instructor could watch the face of his new trainee. How many such faces had he seen on a first flight after a prolonged interval! He had seen the patronising good humour of experienced aces, he had seen the burning eyes of air enthusiasts on hearing the familiar rhythm after long, weary months of hospital life. He had seen men who had been hurt in a severe crash turn pale, bite their lips, show nervousness. He had seen the eager curiosity of greenhorns taking off for the first time. But never before, in all his years of experience, had Naumov seen such a strange expression as that which the mirror showed him on the dark, handsome face of this man who was evidently no newcomer to flying.

A feverish flush showed through the dark skin of the newcomer's face, his lips paled, but not from fear, no, from some kind of fine excitement which Naumov could not understand. Who was he? What was going on inside him?

"Here's a queer fish! Have to be careful with him. You never know," Naumov decided. But there was something in this face looking out of the mirror that gripped the instructor.

"Handing over," he said, but he did not hand over completely, he only weakened the grip of hands and feet, prepared at any moment to take over control from this strange fellow. Through the controls, which duplicated every movement, Naumov could feel the new man's confident, experienced hand, "a pilot sent down from heaven," to quote a favourite saying of the school's chief of staff, an old air wolf who had flown back in the civil war.

After the first circle Naumov ceased to feel apprehensive about his pupil. The machine was flying well. The only strange thing was that while keeping level, the trainee kept making small turns to the right, the left, ascending slightly and sinking again. It was as though he were testing what he could do. Naumov settled in his own mind that the next day he could send this new man up alone, and after two or three flights transfer him to a UT2, a training plane which was an exact plywood copy of a fighter.

It was cold up in the air, the thermometer on the wing showed twelve degrees below. A sharp wind penetrated into the cabin, made its way through the flying boots and chilled the instructor's feet. It was time to land. But every time Naumov gave the order through the speaking tube, he saw such a beseeching look, almost like a prayer in the burning black eyes in the mirror, no, it was not that, it was more like a demand—that he had not the heart to repeat the order. Instead of ten minutes they flew for nearly half an hour.

Clambering out of the cabin, Naumov jumped and stamped beside the plane, beating his arms. That morning the early frost was pretty sharp. The trainee fussed for a long time with something in the cabin, and climbed out slowly, as though reluctantly, and on alighting, seated himself on the wing, happy, really looking a little intoxicated, his cheeks red with the wind and excitement.

"Well, are you frozen? My feet got chilled even through my flying boots, and you're in ordinary boots. Aren't your feet cold?"

"I haven't any feet," replied the trainee, still smiling at his own thoughts.

"What?!!!" Naumov's mobile face lengthened.

"I haven't any feet," Meresyev replied very distinctly.

"What d'you mean, haven't any feet? How am I to understand that? Hurt, or what?"

"There aren't any, that's all... Artificial feet."

For a moment Naumov stood rooted to the spot. It was just impossible, what this queer fellow had told him. How could he have no feet? He'd just been flying, and flying not at all badly....

"Show me," the instructor ordered rather apprehensively.

Alexei was neither annoyed nor offended by this curiosity. On the contrary, he wanted to impress this amusing, jaunty man, and with the gesture of a conjurer he pulled up both trouser legs simultaneously.

The trainee was standing on artificial feet of leather and aluminium, smiling gaily at the instructor, the mechanic and the other pilots awaiting their turn.

2.97

Now Naumov understood the man's exoltemont, the strange expression of his face, and his avid thirst to prolong the flight. He was completely conquered. He leaped at the trainee and shook his hand frantically.

"My God, man, how did you manage it... Why, you must have plenty of guts!"

Alexei had broken through the barrier and the main thing had been accomplished. The instructor had been won over. In the evening they got together and made out a plan of training. They agreed that Alexei's position was a precarious one, that the tiniest mistake could lead to his being prohibited from flying at all. And although now he longed more than ever before to get onto a fighter as quickly as possible and help to defend that famous town on the Volga, Stalingrad—nevertheless he agreed to be patient, and to get a good all-round training. He realized that in his position he could not afford to be anything less than "tops."

For over two months Meresyev worked hard in the training school. Snow covered the aerodrome, and the aircraft were fitted with skis. Taking off, Alexei found the bright autumn colours beneath him replaced by a study in black and white. News of the German defeat at Stalingrad, the destruction of one-sixth of the German army, the capture of von Paulus flashed round the world. In the south the big push got under way—unprecedented, irresistible. General Rotmistrov's tanks crashed through the front in a bold raid and raised hell far in the enemy's rear. It was hard for Alexei to creak about in the air on a small training plane when such tremendous events were taking place at the front, such gigantic air battles raging, harder than it had been to pace the hospital corridor day by day or learn to dance with his swollen, tortured stumps. But back in the hospital he had vowed that he would return to the air, he had made this his aim in life, and had pressed on towards it, through suffering, pain, weariness and chagrin.

Naumov decided that Alexei was to pass a flying test in the middle of December; the flight was to be inspected not by the instructor, but by the chief of staff, that same stout, red-faced lieutenant colonel to whom Alexei had reported when he arrived at the school.

Conscious that he was being watched from the ground, and that this day would decide his fate, Alexei surpassed himself. He put the small, light plane through such daring stunts that the seasoned lieutenant colonel was loud in his praise. And when Meresyev crawled out of the machine, he saw by Naumov's face, beaming in every wrinkle, that he had pulled if off.

"Good work! Yes... An airman by the grace of heaven," growled the lieutenant colonel. "Now see here, young man, what about stopping here as instructor? We need men like you."

Meresyev refused emphatically.

"Well, the more fool you, then! There's no trick in fighting! But here you'd be training men."

Suddenly the lieutenant colonel noticed the stick on which Meresyev was leaning and his face crimsoned.

"What's that? Give it here! Think you're going on a picnic with a stick? To the guardhouse! Two days... Got to have a mascot... damned superstition... All that's missing is the ace of clubs on the fuselage. No more of that nonsense. You hear?"

The lieutenant colonel snatched the stick from Meresyev's hand.

"Comrade Lieutenant Colonel, permit me to report—he has no feet," instructor Naumov came to his friend's defence.

The chief of staff's face turned purple, his eyes protruded and his breath came in gasps.

"What's that? What's this yarn you're spinning? Is that true?"

Meresyev nodded, anxiously watching the fate of his precious stick. He wouldn't for anything in the world be parted from Vassili Vassilievich's gift.

The lieutenant colonel squinted suspiciously at the friends.

"Well, if it's that way, old fellow, that's different. Show me your feet, will you?.. M'yes!..."

Alexei Meresyev left the training school with an excellent report. Nobody could have better estimated the airman's amazing achievement than the crusty lieutenant colonel, that old "air wolf." He did not spare his praise, and recommended Meresyev for service "in any branch of the air force, as a skillful, experienced pilot."

Meresyev spent the rest of that winter and the early spring in a school for requalifying. This was an old-established military air school with an excellent aerodrome, fine quarters, and a well-equipped club where Moscow theatre troupes frequently gave entertainments. This school too was crowded, but the pre-war rules and regulations were jealously kept down to all the small points of military étiquette which had to be observed: dirty boots, a missing button or a map case carelessly slipped on over the belt could bring two hours penalty drill.

The large group of airmen to which Alexei had been assigned were training to fly the Lavochkin fighter.

That was all very well but there was a big push at the front, continual hard fighting, and Alexei listening to lectures in the spacious classroom was longing to get back to the front. He had learned to master physical suffering. He had compelled himself to achieve the impossible. But all this did not help him overcome his restlessness, and often for days on end he would walk about the school silent, morose and absent-minded.

One piece of good luck was the arrival of Major Struchkov. They met like old friends. Struchkov arrived a week or two after Alexei, but immediately adapted himself to the busy life of the school and was soon everybody's friend. He understood Meresyev's mood perfectly, and when they were making their way to the dormitories after supper, he nudged him.

"Don't you worry, lad, there's plenty of war left for us. See how far to Berlin yet—many a long step. You'll get your fill of fighting all right!"

In the two or three months they had not met, the major had become noticeably older, thinner. When on the first day of Struchkov's arrival they were recalling old friends, he never spoke of Klavdia Mikhailovna, and seemed to avoid mentioning anything that might recall her. But on the second day, when they shared a table in the mess, he suddenly burst out:

"But I write to her, to Klavdia Mikhailovna and she writes back."

Meresyev made no comment, but ate his soup in silence. Suddenly the major pushed away his plate so brusquely that some of his soup spilled onto the tablecloth.

"See, she keeps on telling me to forget her. Why, the woman's a fool, forget her! And what for? Because she doesn't love me. But why — I can't understand—why shouldn't she? Well, all right, say she doesn't love me, you can't make her. But at least let her give me a bit of hope. Why can't she let me take care of her a bit, the fool of a woman. Because I know she's having a thin time. I sent her a parcel and she sent it back and got angry, too. I sent her my allowance, what do I need it for anyway, when I've got everything provided — and you should have seen what a row she made! You don't respect me, you're insulting me! . . The devil and all. . . And the hell of it is; if there was someone else, but—it's just the shadow of a dead man. Or maybe she's got someone? Eh? What do you think?"

The major wriggled uneasily on his chair.

"No, I don't think she has."

"Honest? Well, what's up with her, then? Is she wanting to be a nun, or what? They don't take nuns now, anyway. . . Hell, that black-eyed blonde again!" the major suddenly snorted, pushing away a plate of millet porridge with prunes baked in it. For some reason or other the head cook was particularly fond of serving this pudding at the school, where it was generally known as the "black-eyed blonde."

It was only at training, that the major livened up, and became his bold, ingenious, witty self again.

In the middle of the winter, the group to which Meresyev and Struchkov had been assigned began flying. By that time Alexei already knew every part of that small, stubby-winged Lavochkin-5 that looked like a flying fish. In his spare time he used to go out onto the aerodrome to watch these planes take off and rise steeply after a short run, watch them dancing in the air, their blue fuselages glinting in the sunshine. He went up to one of them, examined it, stroked the wing, and clapped the body as though it were some fine, mettled horse instead of a machine made of aluminium. The rest of the group came out on the runway. Each was eager to be the first to try his hand. Struchkov was the first to be summoned by the instructor. His eyes sparkling, the major smiled mischievously and whistled cheerily while fastening his parachute straps and closing the cabin.

Then there was a thunderous roar of engines, the aircraft tore away and raced across the aerodrome, raising a long sparkling rainbow of snow dust and soared into the air. Struchkov traced a tight arc over the aerodrome, veered, banked steeply, went through all the stunts with a skillful swagger, disappeared, then dived out from behind a wing of the school and roared overhead at full speed, nearly taking off the caps of the watching pilots. Once more he disappeared, then came into sight again to make a perfect three-point landing. He sprang out of the cabin wild with excitement, like a boy who has got away with a smart trick.

"It's not a plane, it's a violin, a first-class violin," he interrupted the instructor, who was beginning to tick him off for being too daring. "You could play Chaikovsky on it. . . I swear you could! It's a great life, Alyosha!" and he slapped him on the back heartily.

The aircraft really was superb—there could be no doubt about that. But when Meresyev's turn came and he rose into the air, he suddenly felt that for him, a cripple, this horse was too mettlesome, and demanded special care. Gone was that wonderful sense of complete contact with his machine that gives an airman the full rapture of flight. The aircraft answered to every touch, even a slight trembling of the hand on the joystick was immediately transmitted into an answering movement of the plane. It really did respond like the sensitive strings of a violin. And it was just this that forced upon Alexei the full, bitter realization of his irreparable loss, he knew that in guiding this machine, even after the most thorough training, his clumsy artificial legs would never take the place of real live feet.

The aeroplane cut lightly through the air, but Alexei was afraid of it. He noticed that his feet moved too late on sharp turns, they had not that perfect coordination which is second nature to a pilot. This lag could send the machine into a fatal corkscrew dive. Alexei felt like a hobbled horse. He was no coward, he was not afraid for his own life, he had not even tested his parachute before taking off; what numbed him was the fear that the smallest mistake could eliminate him from fighter flying and forever close the path to his beloved profession. He was doubly cautious and came down feeling thoroughly upset and here, to make matters worse, the awkwardness of his feet brought him down in such a clumsy landing that the machine leaped several times on the snow.

Alexei climbed out of the cabin, grim and silent. His comrades, and even the instructor, smothering their airmen's conscience, crowded round to praise him—with a leniency which he felt to be an insult. He stopped them with a gesture, and silently cut across the aerodrome to the school building, swaying, dragging along his feet. To find himself incompetent now, when he had already got as far as a fighter plane, was the hardest blow since that April morning when his disabled aircraft had crashed into the pines. Alexei was missing at dinner time, he did not come to supper. Despite school regulations, prohibiting the use of the dormitories during the day, he lay on his pallet in his boots, his hands clasped behind his head, and nobody had the heart to reprimand him—neither the officer on duty nor the superior officers passing through. Struchkov came in, tried to talk to him, received no answer and went out again, shaking his head sympathetically.

He was soon followed by the school political officer, Kapustin, a short, awkward man with thick glasses and a uniform that hung upon him like a sack. The men liked his lectures on world affairs, but they had no great opinion of him as a senior officer, regarding him as a civilian, who had landed into the air force by some accident and understood nothing about flying.

Kapustin paid no attention to Meresyev, looked round the room, sniffed the air, and suddenly exclaimed angrily:

"Who the devil's been smoking here? Comrade Senior Lieutenant, what's the meaning of this?"

"I don't smoke," said Alexei indifferently, without moving.

"And why are you lying there? Don't you know the rules? Why don't you stand to attention when a senior officer comes in? Get up."

This was not an order, it was said very quietly, like a civilian speaking. Meresyev obeyed languidly and stood to attention beside the pallet.

"That's better, Comrade Senior Lieutenant," Kapustin approved. "And now let's sit down and have a talk."

"What about?"

"About what we're going to do. Only let's get out of this room, I want to smoke, and it's not allowed here."

They went out into the corridor, dimly lit by a blue blackout lamp, and stood beside the window. Kapustin's pipe bubbled in his mouth, every now and then casting a dull glow onto his broad, thoughtful face.

"I intend to give your group instructor a reprimand today."

"What for?"

"For letting you go up without first receiving permission from the school commander. . . Why are you staring at me? Actually, I ought to give myself a reprimand for not having talked to you before. There's always no time, though I did mean to. . . Well, never mind. You see, Meresyev, it's not such a simple thing for you to fly. And that's why I'm going to reprimand the instructor."

Alexei said nothing. What sort of man was this one, standing beside him puffing away at his pipe? A bureaucrat, thinking somebody had infringed on his rights, by not informing him that something unusual was happening in the school? A red tape official who had discovered the article in flying regulations forbidding men with physical disabilities to go up? Or just a fool taking the first chance to show his authority? What did he want, why had he come, when a man was feeling fit to hang himself as it was.

Meresyev found it hard to contain himself. But many hard months had taught him to beware of hasty conclusions, and there was something about this awkward Kapustin that reminded him vaguely of Political Officer Vorobyov, whom Alexei in his own mind always called "The Real Man." The glow of the pipe brightened and faded, and the broad fleshy face with its wise eyes emerged from the blue dimness and disappeared again.

"It's this way, Meresyev, I don't want to pay you compliments, but however you look at it, you're the only man in the world flying a fighter without feet. The only one!" He peered into the mouthpiece of his pipe in the dim light, and shook his head concernedly. "I'm not talking now about your wish to return to the fighting air force. That's an achievement, of course, but there's nothing so very outstanding in the thing itself. In these times everybody's doing all he can for victory. . . What the devil's wrong with this damned pipe?"

He once more began fiddling with the mouthpiece, seemingly quite absorbed in this occupation, while Alexei, troubled by vague premonition, waited impatiently for what he would say next. Still fussing with his pipe, Kapustin continued:

"This isn't a thing that concerns just you, Senior Lieutenant Meresyev. What matters is that you, without feet, have achieved something which the whole world up to now had considered attainable only by a man in perfect health, and by one in a hundred at that. You are no longer just plain Lieutenant Meresyev, you are a great experimenter. . . Aha, it's clear at last. How did I get it stopped up like that? . . Well, we can't, and we haven't the right, you understand, we haven't the right to treat you like any ordinary pilot. You're carrying out an important experiment, and it's our duty to help you in every way we can. But how? Now that's up to you to say—how can we help you?"

Kapustin promised to ask the school commander to increase the number of Meresyev's training flights, and advised him to make out a training program for himself.

"But how much petrol's this going to take?" Alexei worried, surprised to find how easily this small, awkward man had resolved his troubles.

"Petrol's important, especially now. We dole it out in drops. But there are things more important even than petrol," and Kapustin carefully knocked his pipe against his heel to remove the dottle.

On the next day, Meresyev began an individual training. He worked with the same determination as when he had taught himself to walk, run and dance. But that was not all. He tried to analyze the technique of flight, to think it out to the smallest detail, to distinguish its minutest movements and learn each one of them separately. He now made a careful study of all that previously had come of itself.

In his distant childhood days Alexei had learned to skate on the first, transparent ice covering a bay in the Volga shore. He didn't have proper skates—they were beyond the limits of his mother's

purse, but she had asked the blacksmith for whom she washed to make small wooden blocks with metal runners of thick wire, and holes at the sides.

With the aid of string and a stick to twist it tight, Alexei fastened these home-made skates onto his old felt boots, and went out onto the thin, resilient ice of the gulf. The Kamyshin children were there in force, filling the air with shouts and laughter. The boys raced hither and thither, chased each other, leaped and danced about on their skates. It all looked very simple and easy; but when Alexei descended onto the smooth surface, it seemed to slide away from under him, and he slapped down painfully onto his back. He was up in a second, not wanting to show that he was hurt. Fearing to fall backward again, he leaned well forward as he moved his feet, his legs shot out behind him and he slapped down again—this time on his nose. He rose again with trembling legs, and stood considering just what it was that had happened, and watching the other lads' movements. He had already had a painful lesson, he knew that he must neither lean too far forward nor yet throw his weight too far backwards. Trying to hold himself upright, he attempted a few cautious movements—and slammed down onto his side. And so he went on until evening, falling and picking himself up again. He came home to his mother's dismay smothered in snow, his legs buckling with weariness, all bruised and scratched.

The next morning he was back on the ice again. Now his movements were surer, his tumbles less frequent; he could even take a short run and slide forward several yards. But despite all his strenuous efforts, despite the fact that he spent the whole day on the ice, that was as far as he got. One day, however—Alexei always remembered that frosty stormy day with the wind carrying streamers of snow dust over the ice—he slipped into some lucky movement and suddenly, to his own amazement, found himself skating—skating well and confidently, with ever increasing assurance. It was as though all the small habitual movements, all the skill which had been gradually accumulating in him as he struggled, stumbled and rose again, had suddenly fallen into their places in coordination. His whole stubborn mischievous boyish soul was filled with a wild triumph.

And now history was to repeat itself. He flew obstinately, striving once more to merge his being with the aircraft, to sense it through the metal and leather of his artificial limbs. Sometimes it seemed to him that he was getting near it. He rejoiced, flung the machine into some stunt, but immediately realized that his movements lacked assurance, and the plane bucked, refused to answer; and filled with the bitterness of frustrated hope, Alexei once more applied himself to his training grind.

On one of the warmer March days, the aerodrome suddenly grew dark and snow that came in squalls settled on the ground, so that the aircraft wheels made deep ruts. Alexei took off in his fighter for a training flight. There was a diagonal wind blowing that carried the aircraft to one side so that he had to keep correcting his course. And doing this Meresyev suddenly realized that the plane was obeying him. It came like a flash. But Alexei had had too many disappointments to believe in his success. He veered sharply to the right. The plane answered submissively. And Alexei the pilot was swept by the same feeling that had intoxicated Alexei the boy on that far off morning on the dark, crackling ice of the Volga. The dull day seemed suddenly illuminated. His heart beat blissfully, he felt the familiar chill of excitement.

Some intangible point in his training was passed, and now, easily and without strain, he was able to gather the fruits of all those many days of hard work. He had achieved the main objective which had for so long eluded him—he had merged himself with his aircraft, he sensed it like a part of his own body. The awkward, insensible artificial limbs no longer hindered the fusion. Swept by a wave of happiness, Alexei looped the loop and almost before he came out of it, flung the machine into a screw dive. The ground revolved rapidly, the air screeched in his ears, and school and meteorological tower with its swollen cone swam in swiftly whirling circles. He brought the plane confidently out of the dive and into a tight loop. It was only now that he realized all the hidden qualities of the Lavochkin 5. What a machine it was in skilled hands!

Meresyev clambered out of the plane, staggering like a drunken man, seeing nothing of the furious instructor, hearing nothing of his scolding. Let him scold! Detention? All right, he would sit in the guardhouse. What did all that matter now? Everything was clear: he was a pilot, a good pilot, and the extra fuel for his training had not been spent in vain. He would justify that fuel a hundred times over if only he could get to the front as soon as possible.

A swift drumming on the piece of iron hanging on the aerodrome summoned the pilots to their aircraft.

Meresyev raced to his—he got along fairly fast, helping himself with his stick. The cover was already off the engine, and the mechanic, a droll, pockmarked fellow, was by the propeller.

"Contact."

"Contact it is."

The engine roared. Meresyev looked at No. Six, which the commander was flying. Captain Cheslov brought his machine out onto the field. He raised his right hand—"Attention!" The engines roared, the dry grass flattened and whitened in the wind.

On the way, one of the airmen, overtaking Alexei, had shouted that the tanks were attacking. The whole army which had concentrated in the forest was hurling itself against the Germans, gasping and choking in their last convulsive struggles. That meant that the airmen were to cover the tanks' advance through the enemy's defences, already softened up by the artillery. Sooner or later, somewhere up there in the sky he would meet the enemy. This was where Meresyev would show them that he was in no way inferior to any other pilot.

Three machines snorted on the runway, raced along it, another trio followed, a third. Now the first planes were taking off. Meresyev's group followed. The earth swayed beneath him. Without taking his eyes from the first three, Alexei brought his aircraft up to them.

Here were the front line positions. Seen from the air the shell-pitted ground resembled a dusty road after the first heavy drops of a shower. Lines of trenches, pimples of pillboxes topped with beams and bricks. Yellow sparks flaring and disappearing along the whole mutilated valley—the fires of a great battle. How strange, small and toylike it looked from above! It was hard to realize that down below, death was raging, garnering a rich harvest on the flaming, thundering, erupting earth.

They flew over the forward positions, described a semicircle over the enemy rear, and returned across the battlefield. Nobody fired at them. The earth was too busy with its own dreadful affairs to pay any attention to nine small aircraft snaking overhead. But where were the tanks? Ah! There they were. Meresyev saw them come crawling out of the forest, one after the other, looking like clumsy grey beetles. More and more of them came crawling out of the green shadow, stretching along the road that crossed the valley. Now the first ones crawled up the incline and reached the shell-ploughed land, spitting crimson sparks. No one, not even a child could have been frightened by this gigantic tank attack, if they had seen it from the air, as Meresyev did.

He heard Captain Cheslov's voice, hoarse and weary even in this moment, cutting through the static in his headphones:

"Attention! Leopard three speaking! Leopard three speaking! Enemy planes to the starboard, enemy planes to the starboard!"

In front Alexei saw the commander's aircraft. It swayed, tipped from side to side. That meant: follow my movements. Meresyev passed on the command to his group. He looked round. Petrov, his No. 2, was there where he should be.

"Hold on, old man!" Meresyev shouted to him.

"Holding on," came back to him out of the noisy, crackling chaos in his ears.

"Leopard three speaking! Leopard three speaking! Follow me!" rang in the earphones.

The enemy was close. A little lower down, single-engine dive bombers—Junkers 87—were flying in the favourite German formation—V formation. These dive bombers which had become notorious over Poland, France, Holland, Denmark, Belgium and Yugoslavia—a new German design which had been the subject of so many terrible press reports at the beginning of the war, had swiftly become outdated over the Soviet expanses. In numerous battles the Soviet

airmen had felt out their weak spots, and now aces looked upon them as a kill that was nothing to boast about—rather in the same way as a hunter regards a hare or a wood grouse—something demanding no particular skill.

Captain Cheslov did not lead his group straight at the enemy, but somewhat aside. Meresyev decided that the cautious captain meant to come in from the sun, to creep upon the enemy masked by its rays and then attack him unexpectedly. Alexei smiled—wasn't that paying too much respect to them? Though for that matter, caution was never out of place. He glanced round again. Petrov was holding his position, clearly visible against the white clouds.

Now the enemy dive bombers were to their right. The Germans were flying well, preserving a tight formation as though fastened together by cords. The bodies of the aircraft glistened in the sunshine.

"....Leopard three! Attack!" A fragment of the commander's order struck Meresyev's ear.

He saw Cheslov and his No. 2 shoot down from the right, into the flank of the enemy formation. Grey threads of tracer bullets thrashed into the nearest Junkers, it disappeared, and Cheslov with his No. 2 and his No. 3 slipped through the gap and disappeared beyond the enemy line, it immediately closing up again behind them. The Junkers continued flying in perfect formation.

Giving his identity call, Alexei wanted to shout "Attack!" but his throat contracted with excitement and emitted only a stifled "Ah!" In the same instant he was hurtling downward, seeing nothing but that neat enemy formation. He had marked down the plane replacing the one Cheslov had shot down. His ears were ringing, his heart beating wildly. He raced towards the aircraft both thumbs on the trigger. Something like fluffy grey pieces of string flashed past him. Ah! Firing. Missed. Again, and closer. Not touched. But Petrov?—Not touched either. Away to the left. Avoided them. A fine chap! The grey side of a Junkers swelling beyond the cross. Fingers tense on the cold aluminium trigger. Just a little further....

That was when Alexei had the full, triumphant sense of union with his machine. He was conscious of the engine like the beating of his own heart, the wings and rudder were like parts of his body. The smooth, slender body of the German plane slipped from the cross wires of his sights but was immediately caught in it again. Bearing down upon it, Meresyev pressed the trigger. He heard nothing of the firing, saw nothing of the tracers, did not even know that he had hit his target, but continued his mad course against the enemy plane, knowing well that it would break up before he hit it. Alexei was surprised to see that one more was breaking up beside him. Could he possibly have got that one too? No. That was Petrov. He was on the right, that was his work. Not a bad show for a beginner. Alexei was even more pleased with his young friend's success than with his own.

The second trio slipped into the breach in the German formation. Here confusion reigned. Another wave of Germans, evidently flown by less experienced pilots, was breaking up and losing formation. Cheslov's three were racing back and forth among these Junkers clearing the air and compelling the enemy to unload his bombs on his own trenches. This had been the chief object of Captain Cheslov's maneuvre—to come in from the sun had been of secondary consideration.

But the first German formation had again closed up. The Junkers were still making their way towards the tank breakthrough. The third trio's attack had been unsuccessful. The Germans had not lost a single plane. but one Soviet fighter had disappeared, shot down. The tanks were already very close. There was no time to regain height. Cheslov decided to risk an attack from below. Alexei approved. The first trio was already storming up, and the smoky threads of tracers rose like a fountain. Two Germans lost formation immediately, and one of them, probably cut in two, suddenly broke up. Its tail nearly hit Meresyev's engine.

"After me!" Meresyev rapped out, his eyes glancing back at the silhouette of his No. 2, and he pulled the joystick towards him.

The back of the seat seemed to strike him a heavy blow. He could taste the blood on his lips and in his mouth. The machine stood on its tail and roared up vertically. Lying back in his seat, Alexei

for a split second saw the spotted belly of the Junkers.

He pressed both triggers. What he hit he never knew—the tank, the engine, the bomb racks—but the German suddenly blew up and disappeared in a thick brown cloud.

Meresyev's machine was flung to the side and raced past the flame. Levelling out, Alexei examined the sky. His No. 2 was following him on the right, suspended in the blue infinity, over fleecy clouds. The sky was empty, only on the horizon, against the distant clouds, he could see the Junkers scurrying in every direction. Alexei glanced at his watch and could not believe his eyes. He could have sworn that the fight had lasted for at least half an hour. The hands showed that it had taken just three and a half minutes.

"Alive?" he asked, glancing round at the No. 2 who had come up and was flying beside him.

Through the confusion of sounds he heard a distant, triumphant voice:

"Alive... Below... Look down there, below...."

Fires were blazing and smoking on the wrecked, mutilated valley, columns of smoke rising into the clear air. But Alexei was not looking at the burning corpses of enemy aircraft. He was watching the greenish-grey beetles which had already spread over the whole field. They were crawling along two valleys towards the enemy positions, the leading ones were already pouring across the trenches. With crimson flames from their exhausts well behind the German lines, they crawled on further and further, although shells were already bursting behind them and German artillery smoke was drifting in heavy clouds.

Meresyev understood the meaning of those hundreds of beetles deep in the enemy's shattered positions.

Two aircraft from Captain Cheslov's command did not return to the aerodrome that day. Nine Junkers had been shot down. Of course, considered in terms of aircraft, nine for two, was a pretty good showing. But the loss of two comrades cast a cloud over the joy of victory. There was none of that noisy shouting as the airmen clambered out of their machines, as they compared notes on the battle and relived the moments of danger, which usually followed a successful flight. They walked gloomily to the chief of staff, briefly reported the results and dispersed, avoiding each other's eyes.

Alexei was still new to the regiment, he had not even known the dead men by sight, but he was affected by the general mood. He had just achieved the most important success in his life, the thing for which he had striven with all his might and will, all the determination of his resolute spirit—something which decided the whole further course of his destiny, which made him the equal of any man. How many times he had dreamed of this day—lying on his hospital bed, during the hours of persistent training to restore his lost flying skill. But now, when that day had come, when he had shot down two Germans and was once more a real pilot, he, like the others, went up to the chief of staff, to make his brief report, thinking all the while of those who had not returned.

For the Guards fighter regiment in which Alexei was now serving, that day of the tank attack was the beginning of a period of tough fighting. One after the other, squadrons coursed over the locality of the breakthrough. Hardly had one left the battle and landed, when another rose to take its place, while the fuel lorries raced over the field to the first, to fill the thirsty tanks. Quivering steam hung over the heated engines, as over a sun-baked field after a heavy summer shower. The pilots never left their cabins, even their dinner was brought to them. But nobody had any appetite for it; they had other things to think about, and the food stuck in their throats.

It was only in the evening, when dusk cast its sheltering cover over the battlefield, that the airmen went to their quarters. Meresyev made his way to the "moles' settlement" where he lived, taking a roundabout path, through a weed-grown field. He wanted to pull himself together, rest from the noise and racket and all the different impressions of that long day.

Alexei lay down under a birch, and carefully took a single sheet from an envelope. A photograph slipped out with it and fell to the ground. Alexei seized it, his heart beating fast.

The face looking out at him was both familiar and changed beyond recognition. Olga had been photographed in uniform.

The tunic, the leather belt, the Order of the Red Star, and even the Guards badge—it all suited her fine. She was like a slender boy in officer's uniform. But the face wore a tired expression.

Alexei gazed at those eyes for a long time, filled with vague, sweet sadness. He sought in his pocket for the other photograph, where Olga had been sitting in her bright frock on the field starred with tall marguerites. And a strange thing happened. This weary-eyed girl in the tunic, whom he had never seen, seemed nearer and dearer to him than the girl he had known. He turned the card over. On the back were written the words: "Don't forget."

The letter was short and buoyant. The girl was now commanding a sapper platoon, but her platoon was not fighting, it had a job in the rear. It was restoring Stalingrad. Olga said very little about herself, but wrote enthusiastically about that great town, of its ruins to which life was returning, described how women, girls and boys were coming here from all over the country, living in cellars, in pillboxes, in bunkers left from the war, living in railway trucks or in plywood barracks, restoring and rebuilding the town. They had been told that every builder who worked well could later have an apartment in the rebuilt Stalingrad. So Alexei must remember that there would be a place for him to come back to, after the war.

The summer night fell swiftly, and Alexei read the last lines by the light of his pocket torch. He turned its ray onto the photograph again. The eyes of the boyish-looking soldier gazed out at him, straight and honest. It's not easy for you, my dear. . . The war hasn't spared you, but it hasn't broken you either! You love me? I want you to go on loving me, my dear! . . . And suddenly Alexei felt ashamed that for a year and a half he had concealed his troubles from her. He felt like going into the dugout at once, to write and tell her everything, frankly and honestly—let her decide for herself. It would be better for them both, once the thing was settled.

After today, he could talk to her as an equal. He had not only flown, he had fought. After all, he had promised himself to tell her either when his hopes were finally crushed, or when he proved himself equal to others in battle. And now he had achieved it. Two enemy planes shot down by him had flamed to earth in sight of all. Today the officer on duty would enter it in the records. A report had gone in to the division and to army HQ in Moscow.

All that was true, he had carried out the task he had set himself, now he could write to Olga. But on the other hand, if you looked at the matter critically, was a Junkers a real opponent for a fighter? After all, a skilled hunter would not boast of, say, a hare, if he wanted to show what he could do.

The foes raced towards each other at full speed.

Lavochkin 5's and Fokke-Wolf 190's were swift planes, and they approached each other with a tremendous speed.

Alexei Meresyev and some unknown ace from the famous Richthofen division were storming against each other head-on. This is an attack that is reckoned in instants, but those instants mean a nervous strain, a tension of body and mind, that would suffice for a whole day of land battles.

Picture two swift fighters racing straight towards each other at top speed. The enemy plane grows before one's eyes. Here it is, visible in all its details—the fuselage, the glittering circles of the propellers, the black mouths of the cannon. Another second—and the machines will crash head-on and scatter in fragments. This is a moment to test not only the will of the fighter, but his strength of spirit. He who does not possess that strength will not withstand the fearful strain, he who has not the strength to die for his country will instinctively pull the joystick to slip past the deadly fury roaring at him, and the next moment will be whirling down with a riddled plane. And no chance of escape. Experienced airmen know it, and it is only the bravest that will undertake a head-on attack.

The foes roared madly against each other.

Alexei recalled that his adversary was no boy from what was known as the Göring call-up, thrown into battle after a curtailed training to fill up the gaping rents left in the German air force after Stalingrad. This was an ace from the Richthofen division, flying a machine

which clearly bore the black aircraft silhouettes indicating more than one air victory. This man would never lose his head, he would not swerve to avoid the crash.

«Look out, Richthofen,» Alexei ground out through clenched teeth, and biting his lips till they bled, he nailed his gaze on the enemy, forcing himself with all his will power not to close his eyes with the enemy machine thundering against him.

His tension was so great that he almost could see, beyond the bright circles of his own propellers, the transparent shield before the enemy's cabin and through it—two human eyes. Only the eyes, burning with a flame of hatred. It was a vision born of his own nervous tension —but Alexei saw it clearly. "The end!" he thought. The end! Staring ahead, he raced towards the growing vortex. No, the German would not swerve. The end!

Another instant, and death. He was ready. But suddenly, a hand's reach from his plane, as it seemed, the German flinched, shot upwards, and as the shining belly flashed before his eyes, Alexei, pressing all his triggers, sliced it through with a triple stream of bullets. He immediately looped, and as the ground circled over his head, he saw against it the German aircraft fluttering helplessly downward. A wild surge of triumph swept him. He shouted "Olga!" and forgetful of everything, accompanied the plane down to the weed-rusted earth in tight circles, until the German crashed, sending up a thick column of smoke.

It was only then that Meresyev eased up a bit, his petrified muscles relaxed, he felt a great weariness, and in the same instant his eye fell upon the fuel indicator. The needle was hovering by the O.

He had petrol for three minutes, four at the most. To fly to the aerodrome would take him ten minutes at least. If only he need not have wasted time gaining height. But he had accompanied the German to the ground. "You fool," he cursed himself, "you fool!"

His brain was working like a well-oiled machine, as a brave, cool man's mind does in moments of danger. The first thing to do was to gain the maximum height. But not by circling, no, to gain height while approaching the aerodrome. Good.

Setting his machine on the course, and seeing the ground gradually slip away, the horizon becoming swathed in mist, he continued his calculations more calmly. It was no use hoping for more fuel. Even if the tank were tipped away from the indicator, if the needle were slightly out, all the same there would not be sufficient. Land on the way? Where? He recalled the short route. Forest, swamp, humpy fields in a zone of permanent defences, trenches everywhere, shell holes, barbed wire.

No, to land meant death.

Bale out? That he could do. Now, at this moment? Open the cabin, wind racing, pull the joystick, a jerk—and that was all. But the aircraft, that wonderful, agile, flashing bird! Three times that day its fighting qualities had saved his life. To abandon it, permit it to be shattered into a pile of aluminium fragments! Responsibility? No, he was not afraid of that. In such a situation an airman was supposed to bale out. But in that moment he felt his aircraft as a living thing, beautiful, strong, and good, to abandon it would be foul treachery. And then, to return without his plane from one of his first fighting assignments, to hang about in reserve waiting for a new one, again to stand idle when our great victory was being born along the fronts! To take no part in such days. . . .

"I just can't do it!" said Alexei aloud.

To fly as long as the engine worked! And then? Then he would see. And he flew, gradually gaining height, three thousand metres, four thousand, his eyes mustering the district, searching for even a small glade. On the horizon he could vaguely see the forest beyond which the aerodrome lay. It was only fifteen kilometres away. The fuel indicator needle was trembling no longer, it was pressed against the screw. But the engine was still working. What was it working on? Go on, go on, higher. . . That's the way!

Suddenly there came a change in the even roar of the engine. Alexei's ear caught this change at once. The forest was clearly visible, seven kilometres to reach it, three or four flying over it. So close. But there was that menacing change in the tone of the engine. He felt it in his whole being, as though it were not the engine, but he himself gasping his last. And then suddenly—that terrible "chih, chih, chih."

No, it was all right. The engine worked evenly again. It was working, working, hurrah! It was working! And the forest, here was the forest, he could see the birch tops, frothing green, stirring in the sunshine. The forest. Now there could be no question of landing anywhere except on the aerodrome. The way was closed. Forward, forward!

Chih, chih, chih!

Again the even roar. But for how long? The forest was below, a straight, even sandy road running through it. Only three kilometres now to the aerodrome, it was just beyond that serrated ridge which Alexei thought he could see.

Chih, chih, chih, chih! And suddenly such a dead silence, that he could hear the wind whistling through the struts. The end? Meresyev chilled. Bale out? Just a little further... He began to coast down, trying to keep the descent gentle, without turning over into a screw dive.

The silence in the air was terrible! He could hear the engine cracking as it cooled, hear the blood beating in his temples and a ringing in his ears from the swift descent. And how swiftly the earth rose to meet him, as though drawing the aircraft with a strong magnet!

There it was, the edge of the forest, the emerald patch of the aerodrome beyond it. Was it too late? The propeller stood motionless, arrested on a half turn. Terrible to see it like that in the air. Now the trees were very close. The end?.. Would she never know what had happened to him, the dreadful obstacles he had surmounted in these eighteen months? Would she never know that he had achieved his aim, had become a real, yes, a real man, only to crash so soon afterwards?

Bale out? Too late! The forest was rushing upward, its tree tops merging into green strips. When had he seen something like this before? Ah yes, that spring, when he had crashed. Green ribbons racing by beneath his wings. The last effort, pull the joystick... No, no good! The end?

Petrov's ears were ringing with loss of blood. The aerodrome, the familiar faces, the golden evening clouds—everything began to go round. He turned his wounded leg, and the agonizing pain brought him to consciousness.

"He hasn't come back?"

"Not yet. Don't talk."

How could it be that Alexei Meresyev, who today had suddenly flashed up before the German in the very instant when Petrov thought it was all over, that he could now be lying somewhere on that terrible, racked, shell-torn earth, a rent fragment of burned, formless flesh?

The regimental commander pulled down his tunic sleeve. No use watching the time any more. Smoothing his hair away from the parting with both hands, he said in a wooden voice:

"That's that."

"No hope?" somebody asked.

"No. Fuel's exhausted. Maybe he's landed somewhere, or baled out... Here, bring a stretcher!"

The commander turned away and began whistling tunelessly. Petrov felt a lump in his throat again, which seemed to choke him. There was a strange, coughing sound. The men still standing silently on the aerodrome turned, then immediately turned away again. The wounded airman was sobbing on the stretcher.

"Take him away, damn it," snapped the commander in a voice not his own and walked swiftly away, turning his back on the crowd and screwing up his eyes as though against a sharp wind.

The men slowly began to disperse. And it was just at that moment that from somewhere beyond the first scattered trees, an aircraft swept down silent as a shadow, its wheels catching in the crests. Like some spectral form it passed over their heads, over the ground, and as though drawn magnetically to it, touched the field with all three wheels simultaneously. There was a dull thud, the grating of rubble and the rustle of grass—strange in the ears of all airmen, who had never before heard it through the roar of engines. It was all so sudden and unexpected that nobody could realize for a moment what was happening, although it was the most every-day thing in the world. An aeroplane had landed, that same No. 11 that everybody had been waiting for.

"He's come!" somebody yelled, and the sound roused the crowd from their stupor.

The aircraft slowed down, the brakes squealed, and the machine halted on the very verge of the airfield before a row of wavy-tressed young birches, whose white

morning greyness in the rays of the breaking sun.

Nobody emerged from the cabin. There was a general rush for the machine, an apprehension of disaster. The regimental commander was the first to arrive, he jumped lightly onto the wing, and looked into the cabin. Alexei Morosyov was sitting there, his helmet off, deadly pale, smiling with bloodless lips.

"Alive! Wounded!"

Smiling faintly, he looked at the commander with eyes deadly weary.

"No, no. Only got a slight shaking. . . Flew six kilometres on nothing."

The airmen were crowding round to wring his hand, shouting congratulations. Alexei smiled again.

"Don't break the wings, fellows. Look out. You're all over it. Wait a bit, I'm getting out."

At that moment he heard a voice from somewhere below, beyond the cluster of heads encircling him—a familiar voice, but so weak that it seemed to come from far away.

"Alyosha, Alyosha!"

Morosyov came to life. He jumped up, raised himself on his hands, flung his heavy legs out of the cabin, and landed on the ground, nearly charging into somebody.

Petrov's face was the colour of the pillow. Two tears stood in the darkened, sunken eyes.

"God, old man, you're alive? . . . Eh, you devil, you!"

The airman fell heavily onto his knees beside the stretcher, took his comrade's head in his hands, raised it and looked into the blue eyes, expressing both suffering and joy.

"You're all right?!"

"Thanks, Alyosha, you pulled me through. You, Alyosha, you're so. . . ."

"Get the wounded man away, damn it!" rasped the colonel's voice from somewhere near.

The regimental commander was standing beside them, small and lively, swaying back and forward on his strong legs, their tight, well-polished top boots visible beneath his blue overalls.

"Senior Lieutenant Meresyev, give your report. Any enemy aircraft shot down?"

"Yes, Comrade Colonel. Two Fokke-Wolfs."

"Details?"

"One—by a frontal attack. He was hanging on Petrov's tail. The second—a head-on attack three kilometres north of the general fight."

"I know. They observers just reported that. . . Thank you."

"I serve—" Alexei wanted to rap out the regulation reply, but the commander, who was always such a martinet, such a stickler for form, interrupted him in a comradely tone:

"Well done! Tomorrow you'll have to take over No. 3 wing. Today the commander failed to return. . . ."

Alexei made his way to HQ on foot, and as there were to be no more fights that day, the whole crowd followed him. The green mound marking HQ was already quite close, when the officer on duty came running out to meet them. He stopped short before the commander, bareheaded, excited and happy, and was opening his mouth to shout something, when the colonel cut him off in a sharp, dry voice:

"Where's your cap? What do you think you are, a schoolboy in the playground?"

"Comrade Colonel, may I speak to you," gasped the excited lieutenant standing to attention and trying to control his voice.

"Well?"

"Our neighbour, the commander of the Yakovlev regiment, wants to speak to you on the telephone."

"Our neighbour? What does he want?"

The colonel went hurriedly into the dugout.

"It's about you . . ." the lieutenant began telling Alexei, but the commander's sharp voice sounded from below:

"Send Morosyev here!"

When Alexei snapped to attention in front of him, the colonel, his pipe clenched in his hand, attacked him at once.

"What do you mean by misleading me? The neighbouring regiment has phoned, wants to know which of my men was flying No. 11. I said—Senior Lieutenant Meresyev. They asked me how many planes I'd put down for you today. I told them two. Then he said: 'Put him down one more; he took a Fokke-Wolf off my tail today. I saw it crash myself.' Well? Haven't you anything to say?" The colonel frowned, and it was hard to say whether he was joking, or really angry. "Is that right? . . Well, sort it out with him yourself. . . Hello, are you there?

Senior Lieutenant Meresyev's coming to the phone. Here you are."

A familiar bass rolled in Alexei's ear.

"Well, thanks, Senior Lieutenant. A grand shot, saved my bacon. Yes. I followed him down and saw him crash... Feel like a drink? Come along to my HQ, I've got a litre of vodka. Thanks again. Come along!"

Meresyev laid down the receiver. He was so tired with the day's crowding experiences that he could barely keep on his feet. All he was thinking of was to get to the "moles' settlement" as quickly as possible, to his dugout, to throw off his artificial limbs and stretch out on his bed. After shuffling awkwardly beside the telephone, he slowly moved towards the door.

"Where are you going?" the regimental commander barred his way; he seized Meresyev's hand and wrung it painfully in his small dry one. "Well, what am I to say to you? Good work! I'm proud to have men like you under me!" He wrung Alexei's hand once more.

It was late when Meresyev at last found himself back in his dugout, but for some reason sleep would not come. He punched his pillow, counted to a thousand and back, remembered all the names of his friends beginning with A and then with B, and so on, he stared fixedly at the dull flame of the night light, but tonight all of these old, tried methods would not help him. As soon as he closed his eyes, familiar figures flickered before them, some clear, some barely emerging from the darkness: Granddad Mikhail looked at him anxiously; Andrei Degtyarenko's kindly eyes blinked at him; Vassili Vassilievich shook his grey crest angrily; the old sniper's wrinkled soldierly face frowned; Political Officer Vorobyov's humourous and understanding eyes looked up at him from the pillow; Zinochka's fiery hair was ruffled by the breeze; the small instructor Naumov smiled and winked with sympathetic understanding. So many friendly faces smiling at him from the darkness, wakening memories. Then from out of the crowd of friendly forms came Olga's thin face, causing them all to vanish—Olga in her officer's tunic, a boyish figure with large, weary eyes. Alexei saw it as clearly, as distinctly, as though the girl whom he had never seen in that guise were really standing there before him. The vision was so real that he rose.

What did he want with sleep! A wave of happy energy lifted Alexei from his pallet, he lighted the lamp, tore a sheet of paper from an exercise book, and after rubbing his pencil end to a fine point on the sole of his boot, began to write.

"My own darling!" he wrote illegibly, unable to keep pace with his surging thoughts. "Today I shot down three Germans. But that's not what matters. Some of my comrades do that nearly every day. I wouldn't write especially to boast of that... Today I want, today I have the right to tell you everything, all that happened to me eighteen months ago, all that I'm sorry, terribly sorry I ever hid from you. And now today, at last, I have made up my mind. . . ."

EPILOGUE

In those days when the Battle of Orel was nearing its victorious conclusion, and the front-line regiments advancing from the north reported that from the Krasnogorsk Heights they could see the burning town, the Bryansk front HQ received a report that the Guards fighter regiment operating in this district had shot down forty-seven enemy aircraft in the past nine days. They had lost five of their own machines and only three men, as two of their pilots had baled out and got back to their regiment on foot. Even in those days of the big Red Army push, such successes were unusual. I flew to that regiment on a liaison plane, intending to write about the Guards pilots for *Pravda*.

We landed in the evening, when the long day of hard fighting had ended. Around Orel the Germans were particularly active in the air; that day the fighters had had an average of seven battle flights, and by dusk, the last group was returning from its eighth. The regimental commander, a small, agile sunburned man with his new blue overalls tightly belted and his hair neatly parted, admitted frankly that he was in no condition to tell me anything intelligible,

as he had been on the aerodrome since six in the morning, been up himself three times and could barely keep on his feet. Yes, the weary commander was in no state for newspaper interviews that day. I saw that I would have to wait until morning, and in any case, it was too late to return that night. The sun was sinking behind the birches.

The last planes touched down, and without shutting off the engines, made straight for the forest. The mechanics turned them round by hand. It was only when the planes were under its green cover that the pale, weary airmen clambered slowly out of the cockpit.

The last aircraft to arrive belonged to the third group. The transparent cover of the commander's cockpit opened. First of all a long ebony stick with a gold monogram flew out and fell onto the ground. After that, a broad-shouldered, sunburned, black-haired man raised himself on strong arms, swung agilely over the side, stepped onto the wing and then dropped heavily to the ground. Somebody told me that this was the best airman in the regiment, and I decided to speak to him at once, so that the evening might not be entirely wasted. I remember vividly how he looked me straight in the face with lively black Gipsy-like eyes in which a spark of boyish mischief mingled strangely with the weary wisdom of a man who had seen and experienced much.

"Give me a chance," he begged, smiling. "I can hardly keep on my feet, honest. Six battle flights. My ears are ringing. Had anything to eat? No? Splendid, come along to the mess, we'll have supper together. When we've shot down a Jerry we get two hundred grams of vodka with our supper. Today I've got four hundred coming. We'll talk while we're having supper, if you can't wait."

I agreed. I had already taken a fancy to this frank, jolly fellow. We went along the path which the airmen had trodden straight through the wood. My new acquaintance walked quickly, sometimes stooping to pick some whortleberries which he popped straight into his mouth. He seemed very tired, for he walked heavily. But the strange thing was, that he nevertheless did not lean on his stick. It dangled from his arm, and it was only occasionally that he took it in his hand to crush a poisonous toadstool or knock down a pink bunch of willow herb. When we crossed the gully and climbed up the steep, clay slope on the far side, he moved slowly, pulling himself up by the bushes. But even then he never helped himself with his stick.

Once in the mess, his weariness seemed to vanish. He sat down by the window through which we could see the crimson sunset—a sign of wind the next day, according to airmen.—greedily drank off a large mug of water, teased the pretty curly-headed waitress about some friend in hospital who must have been on her mind when she put too much salt into the soup. He ate heartily, crunching small tender bones with his strong teeth. He joked with his comrades at other tables, made me tell him all the latest news from Moscow, the new books, the new plays at the Moscow theatres, which, he said, he had never visited. When we had finished the sweet—black-current jelly, dubbed the "storm-cloud" here, he suddenly asked me:

"Where are you thinking of spending the night? Why not come along to my dugout." His face clouded for a moment and he explained grimly: "My neighbour didn't come back. . . So there's a pallet. I'll find sheets, come along."

He was evidently fond of company, the kind of man who likes to talk to a newcomer and ask him about everything in the world. I agreed. We went into the gully, with dugouts sunk along either side, where rotting leaves, damp raspberries, lungwort and willow herb breathed a pungent perfume.

When the flame of the home-made lamp illuminated the dugout, I saw that it was sufficiently roomy and comfortable. Two neat beds stood in recesses in the clay wall, there were mattresses of waterproof capes filled with fresh fragrant straw. Young birch branches stood in the corner, "for the scent," as the airman explained. Level shelves cut in the walls over the beds and covered with newspaper held piles of books, and washing and shaving requisites. Two photographs in home-made frames of transparent plexiglass hung over one bed. On quiet days handymen in the regiment often made these frames out of fragments of smashed enemy aircraft. On the table stood a messtin filled with luscious raspberries. The fresh birch branches and the pine needles covering the floor, the

coolness in the dugout and the chirping of the grasshoppers outside filled us with such a pleasant weariness that we both decided to postpone both our talk and the raspberries until morning.

The airman went outside, where he could be heard spluttering and splashing as he washed and brushed his teeth. He came in, turned down the lamp and began to undress. Something dropped on the floor with a thud. I looked round, and could not believe my eyes. He had dropped his feet onto the floor! An airman without feet! A fighter! The pilot who only that day had shot down two aircraft! It seemed incredible.

But there were his feet on the floor, in their army boots. Their tops lay beneath the bed, and it looked as though a man were concealed there. My face must have shown my amazement, because the airman glanced at me and then asked with a sly, satisfied smile:

"You really never noticed?"

"It never entered my mind."

"That's fine! I'm only surprised that nobody told you. How did they miss the chance to brag about such a crazy thing to a new man, and from *Pravda* at that?"

"But it's incredible! What the devil! A fighter without feet! There's never been anything like it in the history of flying, so far as I know."

The airman whistled merrily.

"Oh—the history of flying... There's plenty of things Soviet airmen have added to that in this war. And believe me, I'd much prefer to fly with real feet instead of these. But it can't be helped—things just turned out that way," and the airman sighed. "Though for that matter, the history of flying does know something like it."

He dived into his satchel and took out a magazine clipping, rubbed and torn at the folds, carefully pasted onto a piece of cellophane. It was about an airman who had flown without one foot.

"In the ordinary way I loathe it when people start asking when and how... But just now it's all come back to me... You're a stranger, tomorrow you'll leave and we'll probably never meet again... Would you like me to tell you how it all happened with my feet?"

He sat up in bed, pulled the sheet up to his chin and began telling me the story. He seemed to be thinking aloud, forgetful that he had a listener, but the tale was clear and vivid. I felt that he had a fine brain, a clear memory and a really good heart. Realizing at once that I was about to hear something quite out of the ordinary, something that probably I would never have another chance to learn, I had picked up the exercise book lying on the table, his assignment report book, and began writing down the tale as he told it.

Imperceptibly, night shrouded the forest.

This man's amazing story produced such an impression upon me that I tried to write it in as great detail as possible. I filled one exercise book, started a second, filled that one too, never noticing the paling strip of sky through the narrow entrance to the dugout. Alexei Maresyev brought his story up to the day when he shot down three aircraft from the Richthofen air division, and once more felt himself an airman in the fullest sense of the word.

"Well, I've been letting my tongue run away with me, and I've got to take off in the morning," he interrupted himself in the middle of a sentence. "Have I told you all you want?—Well, time for bed."

"Well, but how about Olga? What did she answer?" I asked, and then immediately caught myself up. "Though maybe I shouldn't ask you that, I'm sorry, don't answer if you'd rather not."

"No, why not?" he laughed. "We were just a pair of fools. You see, it turned out that she'd known all about it the whole time. My friend Andrei Degtyarenko—I told you about him—he'd written to her at once and told her everything—first about the crash, and then about how my feet were amputated. But when she saw that I said nothing about it, she, deciding that I found it hard to discuss it, pretended to know nothing at all about it. So we were deceiving each other for no reason at all. Would you like to see her?"

He turned up the flame of the lamp, and took down the two photographs framed in plexiglass hanging over his bed. On one of them, an amateur snapshot, faded and rubbed, it was just possible to make out a girl laughing gaily, on a background of a flower-starred meadow. From the other there looked out the thin, resolute face of that same girl in the uniform of a junior lieutenant of the technical service... She

was so small that she looked like a mere slip of a boy but the eyes were weary and penetrating, with little that was youthful about them.

"How do you like her?"

"Very much indeed."

"So do I," he laughed good-humouredly.

He blew out the lamp. The pale half-light of dawn filled the dugout, and mosquitoes whined—the only discomfort of that cosy forest dwelling.

I never met Alexei Maresyev again, but wherever the war carried me, I was always accompanied by those two exercise books in which I had taken down the lieutenant's strange Odyssey. How many times during the war, in lulls, or wandering through the countries of Europe, I tried to write up the story, but always laid it aside again, because all I could write seemed but a pale shadow of his life.

Then I found myself in Nuremberg, at a sitting of the International Military Tribunal. The interrogation of Hermann Göring was nearing its end. Staggering beneath the weight of documental proof, driven to the wall by the Soviet prosecutor's questions, "the second Nazi of Germany" unwillingly, through gritted teeth, told the court how the gigantic army of fascism, which had never known defeat, melted and crumbled on the vast expanses of Russia, beneath the blows of the Red Army.

We listened proudly to the reluctantly frank speech about the "incomprehensible Russians" about the "unknown war potential" of our country. It was easy to see that the Soviet people, whose ability, talents, self-sacrifice and courage had so amazed the world during the war really were and remained a fatal riddle for these görings. And after all, how could they, the inventors of that miserable "theory" of "German race rule", ever understand the spirit and might of a man who had grown up in a socialist country! Suddenly the thought of Alexei Maresyev flashed into my mind. His image stood clearly before my eye in that sober, oak-panelled room. And I felt that it was here, in Nuremberg, the town which was the cradle of fascism, that I must relate the story of just one of the millions of Soviet people who had shattered Keitel's army, Göring's air fleet, sent Räder's ships to the bottom of the sea and smashed the Hitler state.

The yellow-backed exercise books, with Maresyev's writing on the cover of one, were with me in Nuremberg too. Returning from the court, I began deciphering my old notes and sat down to work, trying to give a clear picture of Alexei Maresyev and all that he had told me.

There was much that I had failed to write down at the time, much that had slipped my memory in the last four years. And there was much that Maresyev had modestly omitted to say. I had to fill in my gaps. Unable to keep strictly to facts, I made a slight change in my hero's name and gave new names to those who had been with him and helped him. I hope they will forgive me if they recognize themselves in my story.

And that was the origin of the tale of a real man.

Translated by Eve Manning

HOW THE STEEL WAS TEMPERED

He who looks into the future without detaching himself from the present must inevitably concentrate on the youth, the generation to whom tomorrow belongs.

Youth was accorded a central place in Russian 19th-century literature. The young man of the period, his destiny and his character served to illustrate life's most burning problems. He was the subject of debates, battles were fought over him, and his portrayals in fiction were discussed with a passion rarely devoted to an imaginary character.

How much thought, feeling and labour did the great masters of the written word invest in that interminable Russian controversy, and how many characters were created in the quest for a hero whose life would serve as an answer to the question: How was a man with a clear conscience to live in the brutal realm of hatred and animosity?

Dream and Reality, the eternal theme of world poetry, was subjected to a more concrete, practical and active treatment in Russian literature: the problem was pcsed as that of the *dreamer* and *the man of action*.

What was to be done, that was the issue at stake. How was one to live worthily? This was not a problem tackled abstractly, but one that applied to *me*, *here*, *in Russia*, *and now*, *at once*.

What was to be done? How many bitter words were bandied about "dreamers and musers," about "planners and fantasts?"

"To do good. . . Yes, that is the most important thing in life. But how is one to do good?" Even Dobrolyubov, the most brilliant and progressive young man of his time, could not find an answer to this question posed by a Turgenev heroine. He could merely repeat it with accentuated despair: "Is there anyone in our society with a living heart in his breast who has not asked himself the same question? Is there anyone who has not realized that all the active forms taken by his desire to do good to the best of his ability are puny and ineffectual? Is there anyone who has not felt that there is something else, something loftier, that might be done if we only knew how to do it? .. And how are our doubts to be resolved? We search anxiously for an answer in the lucid moments of our existence but cannot find one. . . From day to day the living wait in the hope that tomorrow might be better, that tomorrow might allay doubts, that tomorrow might bring someone who can tell them how to do good. . . ."

The dreamer and the man of action seemed to be fated never to meet and life itself had to be completely remade before the two could become one. In the remaking, a new man combining the two was moulded.

This young man found a place in literature, under the name of Pavel Korchagin (*How the Steel Was Tempered*, by Nikolai Ostrovsky). A representative of the rising generation of the new ruling class that emerged from the October revolution, he was the first of a new gallery of portraits of young men in Russian literature. The lawful son and heir of all that was vital in the mode of life he spurned, he found in himself the strength to cross the chasm between what will some day be called the prehistoric era in mankind's development and its true history.

Pavel Korchagin is not a seeker after truth, but its creator, he does not search for happiness, he makes it. He dedicates himself to his mission with selfless fervour as if anxious to make up for lost time and atone for the idleness of those to whom it was not given to accomplish great things.

History realized man's age-old dream of freedom by shaking life to its very foundations, wrenching it out of the rut and sweeping it onto the broad highway, freeing it of the shackles of convention. The young, reborn life, "overturned by the storm" forging ahead along the unexplored paths of the Russian revolution, began reassessing all values.

The new, revolutionary order could not but produce people moulded in its spirit and after its image, and as surely as the new life asserted itself the new man, whose lungs could inhale only the air of the Great October Revolution, was bound to appear on the scene.

Born of the storm, these newcomers to the historical arena are so much a part of the events which gave them being that the life story of one of them, a boy who became a man, a Young Communist who became a Bolshevik, as told by Ostrovsky in his *How the Steel Was Tempered*, acquired the stature of a novel about the dawn of the Soviet state and the creation of a new world. Few literary works have the power of this book to revive the early period of our Soviet society, to reconstruct our first sense of freedom, while treating of a multitude of issues and problems that will retain their pressing purport for a long time to come.

The late war brought Ostrovsky's Korchagin once again into the limelight. The flower of our youth summoned him at the most trying moments of the struggle and he responded—alive, vital and victorious.

Pavel Korchagin is a young man with a single mind and goal. Dedicating himself to the people, he takes a path which if adhered to ensures a man against both pettiness and half-heartedness; he and his mental powers

spectability clips the wings of youth when it drums into him that "it is time to settle down." The young man on the borderline between youth and maturity has one of two alternatives to choose from. One is to curl up and withdraw into himself like a snail into its shell, and the more he maximizes his ego the paler his personality becomes, and the emptier his soul grows the more he gains the reputation of a serious person. The other alternative is the broad, social path where a courageous mind drives away pusillanimous caution, where the flame of youth does not cool with time but on the contrary burns more steadily like the acetylene flame that melts steel.

Pavel Korchagin too was threatened by a "philistine maturity." His first love was fraught with that danger. For Tonya Tumanova, the indomitable and independent Pavel was like an exotic pet whose fascination lies in the difficulty of taming it. She wanted to take him in hand and cultivate him after her own pattern, and had Korchagin not been Korchagin she would have bridled his rebellious spirit with as great a sense of triumph as she smoothed down his unruly mop of hair.

Tonya asserted her individuality by striving to mould him to a familiar way to a familiar, cosy world of her own, based on the absolute "put the emancipation of a separate personality in brave attitudes" not probably because of this his personality burgeoned and in all its multiformity. It was because she had special aspirations always meant more for Pavel than for others. But he stood out as an individual. In other words, he was superior as an individual for the very reason that his ego expressed the collectivist element in man so fully, vividly and strongly.

That is how the paths of Pavel Korchagin and Tonya Tumanova diverged. Did Pavel sacrifice his happiness for the sake of his ideals? Did he offer up his personal well-being on the altar of duty?

There was bitterness in Pavel's parting with Tonya, but when he told her that he would always belong first to the Party, and then to her, he was expressing something that was not only essential to him, but precious above all else. Pavel was not choosing between feeling and duty, but was merely faithful to his greatest passion, that all-consuming passion which claimed not his mind or his heart alone, but his whole being. The freedom for which he fought, the very process of the struggle and its essence, all the attributes of the new life had for him an inexplicably romantic, poetic fascination.

For Pavel Korchagin, Goryozha Bruzzhak, Ivan Zharky and all "the young friends of the Soviet power" the Revolution was their first love. It enchanted and delighted them. With passionate fervour they assumed the civic burden of men, bridging the gap between youth and maturity with one leap and exulting in the joy of struggle.

The revolution is a harsh school which moulds human consciousness swiftly, sharply and on a broad scale. For youth, "which had not yet found itself in the vortex of the struggle but which clearly expressed the aspirations of its class," Lenin's ideas were the beacon illuminating the path to the future. This youth received the most precious gift, a gift with which history, by-passing many generations, endows only those who come into this world "in its fatal minutes"[1]— a purpose and meaning for existence, an unlimited opportunity for creative activity. The mighty word "Forward" was flung to it like a challenge to scale the shining summits.

The fact that the Korchagins were unaffected by the spiritual crisis experienced by so many civil war heroes over the transition from war to peace, from "storm" to "calm", was the best evidence of their integrity and lofty consciousness. The Korchagins did not really go through any spiritual reconversion. They did not know the meaning of "calm." War was their element, the sphere of activity capable of giving their romantic, expansive, tempestuous natures the outlet they required. Yet the transition to the construction of a narrow-gauge railway line to save Kiev from cold and starvation, far from being an anti-climax for Korchagin and his friends, evokes in them a new upsurge of enthusiasm that makes these

[1] Tyutchev.

pages in the book tremendously moving. To Korchagin's irrepressible nature stubborn arduous toil is a source of endless enthusiasm. So keenly and constantly does he feel the connection between his words and actions and the general movement of the revolution that nothing can ever seem trivial or insignificant to him. Everything is terribly important. And so he hacks away at the frozen soil with his pick as zealously as he had slashed at the enemy with his sabre when he had been a trooper in Budyonny's cavalry.

The fighting spirit of a man face to face with death can always inspire us but a deed requiring sustained endurance and performed with inexhaustible enthusiasm is a much greater source of wonder.

The builders of the narrow-gauge line had to accomplish the impossible. Against the background of utter devastation and abject poverty, with no roof over their heads, barely any clothing to their backs, without the necessary building materials, they had to build in record time the lifeline without which a large city would have been paralyzed. Frequent bandit raids forced them to throw down their spades and take to arms. Even nature seemed against them; heavy rainfalls washed away the results of days and weeks of backbreaking toil. Like all supreme ordeals, this one left no choice other than super-heroism or surrender.

For the Korchagins it was more than a matter of honour. Life itself was at stake. When under normal conditions two weeks at a stretch on the job would have taxed the ability of the strongest, they carried on three and four times as long without respite, working with frenzied determination, with the same implacable hatred for the inanimate enemy as they had felt for the living foe.

"Die five times over, but the line has got to be built!"

In reply to Zhukhrai's question as to whether they would have the strength to do it, old Tokarev, secretary of the Party group, says: "... generally speaking, of course, we can't build it, but on the other hand not to build it is also out of the question. So that is how it is... After all, only we two, Patoshkin and I, know that it's impossible to do the job under such lousy conditions, with the equipment and the number of workers we have. But then every man jack of us knows that it's got to be done. And that's why I would say: 'If we don't freeze to death we'll do it...' It makes your heart bleed to look at these lads. They're worth more than their weight in gold...."

These words may sound like an irrational faith in miracles. Yes, this is faith, rather than certainty, because it does not collapse under the hammer blows of objective reasoning. It seems to ignore reality and deny experience. But this is not a groundless faith because there is some sixth sense which relies upon that unknown quantity—the potentialities of the human spirit. There is no standard measure for the spiritual strength of human beings. But while invisible and immeasurable, it is nevertheless real, it plays its part in life and it introduces qualifying factors to all known quantities.

Falling but rising again, the Korchagins stormed Nature's fortress, and they won when all the odds were against them.

And so it was not a matter of psychological readjustment from war to peace. This problem, which arose after the Civil War and later found reflection in Soviet literature, affects many people today when so many millions of war heroes have returned to their peacetime occupations. But the man, who, after five years of thrilling life which carried him through victorious battles across the whole of Russia to the heart of Europe, finds his old job irksome and dull, does not need to curb the emotional spontaneity of his nature: he has to broaden his inner horizons to find a solution to his personal problem. He has but to perceive the close interrelation between all the actions and efforts of the Soviet state, to appreciate the beauty and significance of the struggle for the people's happiness and welfare whatever form it may take.

"Things happen with dizzy speed and each day brings something new." These words express Pavel's state of mind at the front.

"Each day brings something new and there are no drab, dull days in life,"—is his definition of life on the construction job.

The Korchagins carried two weapons with them while on the railway: the spade and the rifle. The rifles were stacked up and left in the care of sentries while the others furiously attacked the unwilling soil. When the Makhno bands attacked, Korchagin's order would ring out: "To arms, brothers!" And the spades would be thrown down for rifles and another furious battle would ensue. Having driven the enemy away, the detachment of builders would pick up their spades again and apply themselves with equal ferocity to fighting the soil, the blizzards and the snowdrifts.

It is not by chance that in this chapter the title of the book is introduced into the text for the first and only time: "It is here that the steel is tempered."

The crossed spade and rifle was, as it were, the emblem of the unity of all the efforts of Soviet men and women; the ceaseless battles waged by the Korchagins with the enemy and with nature were a striking expression of the historical conditions in which the Soviet state developed, conditions in which intensive peaceful construction had to be combined with supreme vigilance and the knowledge that the powder must be kept dry at all costs.

How the Steel Was Tempered is a confession in the third person. It is almost impossible to draw a line of distinction between the author and his hero. The two march side by side, and like Pavel Korchagin, Ostrovsky would never halt. He lived his life "without a pause for breath", [1] and it is this action he records in his book. There was no time, no time at all to run in to visit mother, no time to see one's sweetheart, no time to take leave of friends, no time to pause for idle introspection. Korchagin was too busy keeping his eyes open, for he was a sentinel of the Revolution. And how much, how very much there was to be done! One cannot but recall here the splendid words of that knight of the Revolution, Felix Dzerzhinsky: "I am in the fire of battle. My life is the life of a soldier who knows no rest

[1] The title of one of I. Ehrenburg's novels.

for he could have one home. There is no time to think of oneself or one's dear ones. The work and the struggle is hellish. But my heart has remained alive in this struggle... All my time is unceasing activity...."

Surely the same might be said of Korchagin, Bruzzhak or Zharky! But how could a man's heart survive this hellish struggle? Here we come to one of the principal traits of Nikolai Ostrovsky and his heroes, of that vital force of the young Soviet society of which this novel tells with such fervour.

At the risk of appearing to contradict ourselves we maintain that a tremendous role in the life of the Korchagins and their unceasing activity is played by thought and reflection. For them no significant event is a mere transitory occurrence; every detail and action of any magnitude is a spur to the imperceptible maturing of the active element in their spiritual makeup. There is nothing of the mechanical in their incessant activity. The Korchagins do not waste much time on introspection. But when they do search the inner recesses of their minds, they do so with an intensiveness that has nothing in common with the tormenting self-castigation of typical young people of the pre-Soviet epoch; theirs is the specific kind of introspection of the man of action, who, while examining himself surveys both his environment and his future. This is a moment when all spiritual forces are mobilized.

Take Ostrovsky's Seryozha Bruzzhak. The day after the counterattack in which the seventeen-year-old youth kills his first man in hand-to-hand combat, he gazes at the calm flow of the Dnieper "unable not to think of the day gone by." Ensconced behind his machine gun in a cramped first-line trench, he cannot tear his eyes away from the wide expanse of waters through which his thoughts are carried into the innermost depths of his being. The strong undercurrents of Ostrovsky's heroes' thoughts never break out visibly on the surface yet they are as tangible as an infinitesimal quantity of radium is tangible though diffused in tons of ore. From the maze of profound meditations Seryozha too emerges with a clear, active idea. As Ostrovsky put it: "He knew that he would kill again, he, the Sergei who also knew how to love tenderly and to cherish a friendship. He was neither malicious nor cruel, but he knew that a horde of misguided soldiers, in whom a bestial hatred had been whipped up, had been sent by the world parasites against his republic. And he, Sergei, killed so as to hasten the day when no man would kill another in this world of ours."

These thoughts of Sergei's may seem old and familiar enough to many readers. Yet to assimilate a ready-made maxim which you hear repeated over and over again is one thing, and to arrive at it by your own experience is another. Seryozha's solution of the crucial problem confronting him was not dictated by any abstract ethical code; it was born of spiritual upheavals that shook him to the very core of his being. At the moment when your bayonet has just sunk into the living flesh of another young man like yourself, when the last searing stare of the dead man's eyes is still alive in your memory, at that moment you learn the true purport and weight of this solution.

Man's duty to his conscience has meant different things at different times, even to the best people of their time. Some have understood it to mean atonement, others nonresistance to evil; some sought to make peace with their conscience by withdrawing from the sinful life of the great world into ascetic solitude, and still others propounded something else. In most cases, however, these philosophical views and practical steps were ways to achieve personal peace of mind.

A man belonging to Socialist society, however, does not seek salvation for his soul but strives to multiply the active forces within it. Thinking of yesterday's bloodshed, Seryozha too dissects his conduct not to justify himself, but, as befits a soldier of the Army of Freedom, to make clear to himself what he is to do in the future. Thinking of yesterday he looks into tomorrow. And while he communes with his conscience, his thoughts are with the republic and all mankind.

Ostrovsky returns time and again to the active element in the mental processes of his characters, and each time he shows the Korchagins arriving at conclusions so clear that without knowing it themselves they are promulgating a code of conduct for all men of clear conscience.

When Pavel Korchagin finished reading *The Gadfly* to his comrades in the cavalry, the "still green Young Communists" fell into a long, deep silence while their thoughts turned to the conception of *honourable* and *ignominious* death. These youngsters had barely begun to live, yet they were prepared in advance to take responsibility for their behaviour at the time of death. The Korchagins learned at the dawn of their life what so many others stumble on only at twilight: that not chance, not fate, but the way a man lives his life, honourably or ignominiously, decides how he will meet death.

Pavel Korchagin spent days and nights in philosophizing in the small provincial town where his friends sent him after he had been stricken by typhus on the railway construction job. "Youth conquered. Typhus did not kill Korchagin. Instead he returned for the fourth time from the frontiers of death." To return to life after having all but died is a milestone in the life of any man, and what it meant to Pavel, as the starting point of a new acquaintanceship with himself and the world, Ostrovsky depicts in his own terse and vigorous style. But for all his terseness, the author succeeds in portraying the full range of Pavel's emotions in all their detail from the first smile of convalescence to his most profound thoughts fully reflecting the world outlook of the new type of man.

It was here in this town that Pavel's comrades, heads unbowed, met their deaths at the enemy's hands. He learned of the martyrdom of a seventeen-year-old girl he had known; the several days of torture that preceded her death had turned her into a babbling old woman. He was told how Valya Bruzzhak went to the gallows singing a militant song "as only the condemned can sing"; how the frenzied hangmen beat her,

and the two comrades who supported her, with knouts in a futile attempt to silence them; how as if impervious to the blows, they continued to sing until they collapsed half dead and had to be dragged the rest of the way to the gallows, and how the song was taken up by the rest of the condemned who were awaiting their doom.

A quarter of a century later the Great Patriotic War gave rise to countless similar tragedies and the gallery of immortals was joined by young people like Zoya Kosmodemyanskaya, Liza Chaikina and the youthful heroes of Krasnodon. And in the hands of A. Fadeyev Ostrovsky's grim portrayal of heroism in the face of death was renewed and developed in the great novel *The Young Guard*.

The two books are interlinked, they depict two generations of flesh-and-blood heroes; the Korchagins passed the flag on to the young men and women of Krasnodon. They trained the new generation in their own image and today in the persons of Shulga and Valko they are intimately bound up with the life of the Young Guards in the same way as Zhukhrai once was with the first Komsomols. The Soviet Socialist society with its moral and political unity knows neither class nor national conflict nor discord between generations, the conflict of "Fathers and Children."

But let us return to Pavel Korchagin.

While out on his last walk through the streets of his hometown, he finds himself at the common grave where his comrades are buried. "Slowly Pavel's hand rose to his cap and he bared his head, and sorrow, a great sorrow, filled his heart." And from that great sorrow a great idea was born, an idea that has become a sacred admonition for the man of Socialist society. Today millions of young people know it by heart. I shall repeat it here once more:

"Man's most precious possession is life. It is given but once, and it must be lived so that there never should be the torments of regret for years squandered away, that shame should never scorch the cheeks for an unworthy and trivial past, and that one could say when dying: all my life and all my strength I have given to the noblest cause in the world, the struggle for the emancipation of mankind. And one must hasten to live, for some absurd illness or some tragic accident might cut life short."

These are words that will never be erased from the memories of the living. They are eternally fresh, they are the inexhaustible fountainhead of life itself. They express the social outlook of the new man and his recognition of his place in history. And we hear them reiterated in a thousand voices and in a thousand different ways by the heroes of our time.

The life-giving force of Korchagin's thoughts is manifested not only in a world of harmony; it is brought out also by the discordant contrast of the old moral code and the sentiments of the man of the old, moribund world, a man everywhere and always alone.

How often throughout the ages has man paused at the tomb of a departed fellowman to ponder the meaning of life! How many poets and philosophers have immersed themselves in fearful introspection in the face of eternity! How many brilliant poetic tributes, scientific treatises, confessions and credos, signs of grief and mute tears of desperation have been sacrificed at the altar of this eternal thought! Yet the great question remained unanswered and man drained the cup of doubt to the dregs. The grave remained the inevitable goal. Man was but an uninvited guest on earth, an insignificant dust-speck in the infinity of space. Man and his works were created from dust and for only a fleeting moment. Everything was vanity. Nothing was immutable. What other thought could lay claim to like tenacity throughout the ages? And men of bygone ages, poisoned and enfeebled by this thought, "hastened to live and to feel,"[1] only to halt in consternation in the face of the futility of it all. Lost in the infinity of the world, they had to admit failure in their quest of happiness.

And it seemed as if it were fated to be like this till the end of time, though there were thinkers like the Russian critic Belinsky who foresaw that "the very same reflection and reasoning which poisons all our joys today must some day become the source of a full life on a higher plane."

Like men of past ages had done before him, Korchagin, the man of the new, Socialist society, bared his head before a tomb and a great sadness filled his heart. His thoughts, too, start from the hopeless reflection that man is given life only once.

His conclusion, however, is different. He is purposeful, not dazed and lost. He is eager for action, not prostrated. He asks no question, he supplies the answer. For the first time since man discovered himself he looks into unfathomable eternity and does not swoon; he does not look through the eyes of a sage but of a typical man of the people. No writer before Ostrovsky ever created a composite character with such spiritual strength; in him we saw the first spokesman of his youthful generation who made contemplation of death "the source of a full life on a higher plane."

But perhaps Korchagin's simple, utilitarian mind lacked the imagination to see that his idea clashed with the cosmos as well as the purport of his own existence? Perhaps he stood so firmly on his two feet because he was unable to soar in his thoughts into the dizzy heights of eternity and plumb the mysteries of destiny and death?

Yet the 15-year-old Pavel Korchagin, lying sleepless through the night in the darkness of his prison cell, put his first thoughts about his impending death in the words: "To die means no more life for all eternity."

And what about the skies and the seas and the riddle of the world, the mysterious silence of the universe? Unexpected though it may seem at first, nature occupies an enormous place in the thoughts of the heroes of *How the Steel Was Tempered*. Like Ostrovsky himself his heroes combined a spiritual need to observe and ponder and divine the meaning of things with an unprecedentedly

[1] Griboyedov. *Wit Works Woe*.

active life. Time and again the magic of nature enchanted Korchagin. The boundless expanses of the sky and the sea fascinated him and he "could not tear his eyes away from the majestic calm of the deep blue."

Was it accidental that the ever restless Korchagin found himself captivated by the "majestic calm", or is it the dialectics of the nature of man? Is there no inner connection between the "joy of contemplation" and the "joy of doing?" It would be a gross mistake to understand the practical purposefulness of the Korchagins as an evidence of a limited and prosaic utilitarianism of imagination. They too could derive enjoyment from listening to the whisper of the oaks, hearkening to the silence of the night, probing the infinity with their eyes. What then gave the new man the strength his forebears lacked to emerge from the graveside grief and continue on his further journey with step firmer than ever? What peculiarity of his nature is responsible for this unparalleled victory of the human spirit?

We believe that the source of the moral stamina that distinguishes the people of Socialist society is the sense of joint, common effort which has supplanted the warped mentality of individualism. The sense of collectivism is a strong spiritual support for the individual. A person's outlook on all spheres of life, including those that may at the given moment seem to be separated by an insuperable gulf from his practical endeavours, is determined by his social consciousness, i. e., his understanding of his place in society. No matter how far away from earth a man's thoughts carry him in his contemplation of the infinite they must inevitably be based on terrestrial conceptions that have been given form by social environment, on conceptions that colour the whole imaginary universe.

"Only recently I realized how painful it is to stand at a graveside and know that there is no *other world*!" exclaimed A. Herzen in despair at a period of his life when he had become thoroughly disillusioned with *this world*, believing that bourgeois society marked the consummation of historical development, that heroic exploits and youthful ideals had come to an end and that the streams of time flowed only into the bog of philistinism.

Hamlet's morbid reflections as he holds Yorick's skull about the inevitable conversion of man to noble dust fit for "stopping a bunghole" spring from the fact that "the times are out of joint" the question of to be or not to be demands an answer from him now, not in the nebulous future.

Because his own life is so gloomy and his future so hopeless Lermontov's Hero of Our Times watching the sparkling of the tranquil stars derides with soul-searing scepticism those who believe that ". . . the heavenly bodies have a share in our wretched squabbles over a bit of territory or some other imaginary rights. Yet these lamps, which they thought had been lighted only to illuminate their battles and triumphs, still burn with undiminished brilliance, while their passions and hopes have long since died out together with them like a campfire left burning on the fringe of a forest by a careless wayfarer."

Standing at Valya Bruzhak's grave, Pavel Korchagin does not generalize about a skull that once had a tongue and could sing, but of Valya singing as she mounted the scaffold. Shortly afterwards we see Pavel alone at night on a bridge in Kiev where he hastens to return after his convalescence. "In the infinite silence of the night an enchanted spectacle spread before his eyes, the shadowy horizon was wrapped in black velvet and the phosphorescent stars lit up and twinkled in multitudes of constellations." When Pavel cast his eyes downward to "where the firmament imperceptibly merged with the earth" and saw "the city send a million darts of light into the darkness," the spell was not broken and his fascinated gaze remained fixed on the city lights. These were his lights, sources of warmth and life brought into being by his comrades and himself by selfless labour. These were not the flickering flames of hope lit by a worldly traveller that were bound to go out at any moment, but the steady, unfailing glow of the new life. The great city drew Korchagin to itself "by its might and vitality and the hustle and bustle of crowds and the clanging of street cars and the blasts of automobile horns. More than to anything else he was drawn to the huge factory blocks, the smoke-blackened shops, the machines and the smoothly-humming gears, where giant flywheels swept round and round and there was the pungent smell of lubricating oil—to all this that was so near and dear to him." "Brotherhood, strong and buoyant, and labour" made the great city an irresistible magnet for Korchagin.

The moral strength of this hero of our time is well embodied in these simple words. In the emancipated man, for whom dream and reality are not two irreconcilable conceptions, love of life has acquired a force the pre-Soviet man could never have imagined. Each member of the Soviet Socialist society is bound to life with a million ties, for he is fully aware that everything depends on him and that it is up to him to mould life according to his own desires. Hence his interest in everything around him, for everything is important and vital. An enemy of inertia, he is indifferent to nothing. And while razing the old and building up the new, he is constantly recasting himself and his comrades.

It is not sufficient for a Korchagin to live his own life so that "shame should never scorch the cheeks for an unworthy and trivial past; " he demands that everybody he is associated with in the struggle for the common cause do the same.

By his whole life Korchagin imparted the most profound of meanings to the word "comrade," which moved him beyond all description. Korchagin was a true comrade in the finest, Communist sense of the word.

There are different meanings to the word "friend" and various kinds of friends. There is the hail-fellow-well-met kind, amusing and hospitable, who demand nothing of you and who readily share the boons of life with you. These convivial friends and passive well-wishers are in place when friendship

claims no spiritual sacrifice and presupposes simple companionship. To all intents and purposes, friends of this calibre are utter strangers to one another. They may be fellow-travellers at one or another lap of life but they do not share each other's destinies. A friend like this will desert you in your first adversity when you are most in need of a strong, helping hand. Nor will you turn to him in your thoughts in his physical absence, for together with all that is petty and superficial he will be erased from your memory as an inconsequential, fictitious component of life.

And there is the true, faithful friend. He comes to you at your most trying moments, always inquiring, generous and solicitous, his friendship never dressed up in resounding phrases. He will not always be easy to get along with for his friendship is demanding, it urges the development of all that is best in you, it urges you toward true joys won by honest effort and lashes at you for each manifestation of irresponsibility that is a betrayal of liberty. Human to the core, this kind of friendship finds its consummation not in a fleeting moment enjoyably spent but in a lifetime well lived. And at the crucial moment of your life the true friend brings you succour, not recrimination and reproach.

Pavel Korchagin is a friend of this mould. Many years ago he stepped out from the pages of Ostrovsky's book, and since then has been our invariable companion in all our endeavours. Together with Korchagin the heroes of the pre-war five-year plans performed their supreme feats of labour. At the moment of the greatest trial he stepped to the side of the heroes of the late war and helped stop the onslaught of death by his immortal spirit. And for long years to come he will be with us, living, fulfilling his vow to serve "the noblest cause in the world, the struggle for the emancipation of mankind."

ABRAM GURVICH

NEW BOOKS

100 BEST BOOKS OF SOVIET LITERATURE

Soviet people are summing up their achievements in all spheres for the last three decades in preparation for the November Seventh celebrations marking the 30th anniversary of the establishment of Soviet rule. In the world of fiction these results are being summed up in a series of publications to be known as the *Library of Selected Works of Soviet Literature for the Period of 1917-1947* now being prepared for press by the *Soviet Writer* Publishing House. The hundred books, chosen for this series as truly representative of the best Soviet literature, will each be published in editions of 100,000.

This type of publication differs–radically from the popular American annual publications of any given genre ("Best Short Stories," "Best Plays," etc.). The series planned by the *Soviet Writer* Publishers for the 30th anniversary of the Soviet state will represent all genres of literature.

If all these works were to be read again in their definite order they would give a vivid impression of the artistic force of Soviet literature, its range of humanistic ideas, the ideals of the Soviet citizen, and the national character formed under the influence of the Revolution, the Socialist system and the experience of the Patriotic War.

All the editions are to be completed this year. Some 20 books of the series have already appeared. Among them is Mikhail Sholokhov's four-volume novel *And Quiet Flows the Don* covering the period of World War I, the October Revolution, the Civil War and the beginning of the twenties; and also three volumes of Maxim Gorky's *The Bystander*, drawing a comprehensive picture of Russian life at the beginning of the century, before the Revolution.

A volume of selected works by Alexander Fadeyev will contain his first novel *The Nineteen* dealing with the Civil War, and his latest book *The Young Guard*, an epic portrayal of the people's war against fascism. The selection will contain also Dmitri Furmanov's *Chapayev* and Nikolai Ostrovsky's *How the Steel Was Tempered* which have both achieved vast popularity.

Among the books to come are works by the Soviet writers Yuri Krymov and Arkadi Gaidar, who fell in battle against the fascists. These books represent new trends in literature. In his novels *Tanker Derbent* and *The Engineer* Yuri Krymov portrayed the new Socialist attitude towards work displayed by Soviet intellectuals, who give all their strength and knowledge to bring about an improvement in the lives of the people. The children's writer Arkadi Gaidar wrote a book in which the fruit of his fantasy, as it were, predicted life. The story *Timur and His Team* tells of Soviet children in the rear who undertake to care for servicemen's families. This book was written several years before the war; during the war, children throughout the Soviet Union formed "Timur teams" on their own initiative to help servicemen's families.

Pavel Bazhov's stories collected in *The Malachite Casket* are artistically related folk tales of the workmen of the Urals, giving voice to the people's cherished dreams of happiness, of freedom to work and create, and of justice.

The first historical novel to appear so far in this series is Sergei Golubov's *Bagration* which gives a comprehensive portrayal of the events of the Patriotic War of 1812.

In the sphere of poetry, books of verse by Mikhail Isakovsky and Alexander Tvardovsky have appeared. The former is the author of songs that have attained great popularity in the Soviet land. The volume of Tvardovsky's poetry includes *The Land of Muravia*, *Vassili Terkin* and *The Roadside House*.

The majority of the books included in the series have been translated into English at various times and published in Great Britain and the United States.

WEAVERS' FOLK TALES

Mikhail Kochnev. *The Silver Thread*. Stories of the Ivanovo Textile Workers. *Soviet Writer* Publishing House. Moscow. 260 pages.

The Silver Thread is a collection of the folk tales told by textile workers. These tales were recorded and given a literary background by the writer Mikhail Kochnev. The volume is divided into three parts: *Stories Told by the Shuttle*, *Weavers' Stories* and *Stories of the Past*.

The first part contains tales of fantasy in which magic forces are at action and the forces of nature are endowed with human properties. The second part offers realistic stories from life, the popular fantasy woven around actual events revealing the workers' conceptions of social justice. Finally, in part three we have historical events related on the basis of legends that have been retained in the people's memory and affirm the triumph of truth and justice.

The stories are written in a quaint style of their own, full of local idiom and expressions pertaining to the weavers' trade. In view of this the author has attached an explanatory note to the book. The presence of these colloquial and unusual expressions lends the language a specific piquancy and charm.

The events related in these stories all belong to the dim and distant past. Several themes dominate; these are the triumph of truth and diligence, the punishment of avarice, the strength of Russian talent capable of mastering any art.

The first theme is unfolded in the story *The Good Are Lucky* whose heroine is Dunya, the fine spinner, a favourite character in Russian folklore. In gratitude for deliverance from the hunter, a swan helps the good and hard-working Dunya to spin a thread of unprecedented beauty. Her evil master attempts to deprive her of the results of her work, but the swan helps Dunya to escape from prison where she has to appear each morning in a dress newly woven overnight.

The Silver Thread points the moral of the punishment of avarice. The greedy master persecutes the poor spinner, forcing her to work beyond her strength on an old and faulty loom. An ermine comes to the help of the poor woman and gives her a silver thread from which she spins exquisite yarn. The master sees this thread on the loom at night and begins to wind it up, but the thread draws him into the depths of the forest where he perishes in the deep snow, and the yarn, spun by the working woman, turns into a precious stone.

The Fringed Shawl is the story of a self-taught weaver, in love with his art, who is entranced by the talent of a passing singer. The singer has a wonderful shawl from lands beyond the sea, and the weaver copies it with such exactitude that the singer herself cannot distinguish the copy from the original.

Little research has been conducted into the folklore of factory workers and therefore Mikhail Kochnev's book is of considerable interest from this point of view. The artistic fabric of these stories, their picturesque style, has been fully preserved by Kochnev and this lends the book great charm. The stories contain interesting details of the life of the people and are full of popular philosophical and ethical sayings.

MARSHAK'S NEW POEMS

Samuil Marshak. *Verses*. 1941-1946. *Soviet Writer* Publishing House. Moscow. 120 pages.

This little volume of selected poems written by Samuil Marshak during the war and the first post-war year represents the many aspects of his original poetic talent. The major part of the book, however, is devoted to lyrics.

The first part entitled *On the Road to Berlin*, reflects the events of the war years. These are poems written by Marshak for wartime placards. Especially popular in their time were *The War Winter*, *Suvorov-Chapayev Men* and *A Berlin Epigram*. Also included here is the short poem *The Military Post*, a continuation of Marshak's well-known children's poem *Postman* [1].

There are also several lyrical poems dedicated to the war: *The Ballad of the Monument*, *The Mother*, *Let There Be Light*, and others. In the *Ballad of the Monument* Marshak refers to an episode that actually took place during the Patriotic War: The Germans attempted to loot and wreck the bronze monument to Lenin in one of the occupied cities of the Caucasus. Partisans captured the German lorry that was carrying it away and saved the precious monument. In the early morning, the citizens awoke to find "Lenin, as usual, stretching out his hand to them."

The second part of the book is entitled *Excerpts From a Lyrical Notebook*. It includes 17 lyrics by Marshak, among them: *All That a Man Touches*, *The Trees Outside My Window*, *The House in the Forest*, *The Dictionary*, and others.

These lyrics express Marshak's characteristic features: simplicity, the directness of world outlook, attention to the most ordinary, every-day things, respect for man and his work, a boundless love of life. Marshak's poetical world is unsullied and clear, no matter what his subject: Lenin's mausoleum, spring, trees outside the window, or the dictionary. In one of these poems he says: "And all things touched by man acquire something human." The house which has served men faithfully for so many years, the bridges, and the little streets of the city "say so much to my heart."

The third part, entitled *From Other Times* contains Marshak's translations from a Greek anthology, anonymous authors of the 16th century, Shakespeare's sonnets, the poetry of Wordsworth, Keats, Burns and Kipling. The majority of these translations are published for the first time.

---

[1] See *Soviet Literature*, No. 12, 1946.

STORIES OF NORTHERN COLLECTIVE FARMS

Alexander Tarasov. *Short Stories. Soviet Writer* Publishing House. Moscow. 376 pages.

Tarasov's book is reminiscent of the grim but abundant nature of Vologda Region with its virgin forests, vast lakes and great rivers, and the strong, silent men of the north—serious, persistent, but passionate as the nature that surrounds them.

The author has a peculiar style and theme of his own, which runs through all his works. Their chief interest, however, is not in their subject matter, but in the portrayal of the new human relations born in the Socialist village, and also in the superb pen pictures of the northern landscapes, of hunting and of collective farm work. "Limpid rivers flow through the forests. On their banks, the elk rest. . . You climb up a little hillock and all around you see the earth, bare of any cover, warm with the scent of young shoots and its own freshness. It crumbles and breaks in your fingers, and their skin grows rosy as it comes into contact with the coolness and sap. . . " That is how the earth appeared to the hunter Averyan (in the story of the same name) at a tragic moment in his life, and this gave him the strength to live on; that is how nature is pictured with a multitude of different, tangible details throughout Tarasov's book. The author is himself a native of these parts, he has lived side by side with his heroes, as is clearly seen from the obviously autobiographical story *Father* in which the loneliness of the last individual farmer of the village is painted with great poignancy and daring.

Tarasov conveys the establishment of the new life with all its complications and conflict. His people grow stronger and wiser in this struggle.

The hunter Averyan is one of the most colourful figures in Tarasov's book. The change and broadening of human consciousness is portrayed, however, in an entire gallery of old men and women, such as the quaint hunters Lavr and Onisim, bound by fifty years of friendship, Trofim (*Anna From the Village of Grekhi*) who sees his daughter-in-law in a new light, as a human being of much greater significance than his son; he understands and sympathizes with her desire to leave her conceited, foolish husband whom she has outstripped both in knowledge and in work. The whole of this story, the last in the book, is built up on a delicate "sub-theme."

Among the women who people the book, a lasting impression is made by the merry, clever and passionate Alexandra—"not a woman, but lightning" (from the story *Big Game*); and the calm, collected and clever Nastya (*Hunter Averyan*).

These are representatives of the new, Soviet type of peasant woman emancipated from slavish subordination and from age-old prejudices, the woman who takes an equal part in building up the new life.

How this type originated is related in the story *Friends* told by the author in the first person. The heroine is a middle-aged woman half of whose life has passed under the old regime. This monologue story is told with great artistic delicacy and understanding of local details, in picturesque colloquial language full of quaint sayings, proverbs and folk songs. Before the reader there comes to life a strong and talented woman of the people, oppressed by the terrible life in the old village and later, after the Revolution, rising to her full stature in free, constructive labour.

This volume of Tarasov's stories is a collection representing five years' work (1935-1940) and includes the greater part of the legacy left by this promising writer who perished in the Patriotic War.

THE AVENGERS OF THE GHETTO

Gershel Smolyar. *The Avengers of the Ghetto*. Translation from the Yiddish by M. Shambadal. State Publishing House *Der Emes*. Moscow. 128 pages.

The heroic resistance and fight put up by the Soviet Jewish citizens against the German invaders is described in simple, modest language by G. Smolyar, one of the leaders of the underground in the Minsk ghetto and of the Belorussian Jewish partisans.

Having captured Minsk, the Germans drove the entire Jewish population of the city into a few narrow alleys, surrounded by a stone wall, that formed the ghetto. Under threat of being shot at sight all Jews were obliged to wear the "yellow band." The Germans hoped to incite the Belorussians against the Jews, to isolate and disunite Soviet people, and thus to destroy them more easily.

At first, confusion reigned in the ghetto. People were crushed by the misfortunes that had befallen them, by the executions, humiliation, hunger. Soon, however, an underground group of Soviet citizens, headed by Communists, began to be organized in the ghetto. Among the people of the Minsk ghetto there was no despair, pessimism, submission to their fate. These were men and women of the new generation of Jews who had grown up under conditions of freedom and equality. For these people there could be only one road—war against those who wished to deprive them of the rights won by the October Revolution.

An organizational centre was formed and became widely active in the ghetto, drawing ever larger numbers of people into the movement of resistance. Radio sets were installed in stove flues to catch the Soviet broadcasts... Underground printshops issued leaflets propagating both in the ghetto and beyond its limits the truth about the situation on the front.

Within a short time, the leaders of the underground had established contact with a partisan detachment active in the neighbourhood of Minsk. Weapons, clothing and medicines for the partisans began to be collected in the ghetto.

On November 7th, the Germans roped off the ghetto and led out 80,000 Jews to be shot outside the city.

But on that same night, Soviet citizens gathered in the ghetto to celebrate the anni-

versary of the October Revolution. In a little room looking out onto the street through which the death lorries had rolled all day, an old working man named Goldsack said: "We must act so that we may see the defeat of the enemy." That day marked a new stage in the life of the ghetto—the transition from resistance to armed struggle against the enemy.

Smolyar describes how the first group, sent from the ghetto, broke through the stone wall and met with a group of Russian and Belorussian underground workers in Minsk. He relates innumerable cases when Belorussians concealed and adopted Jewish children, brought food to the ghetto, helped Jews to escape. Many Russian and Belorussian women, bound by marriage and unwilling to be parted from their families, went to live in the ghetto and wore the "yellow band." Smolyar writes: "Without the brotherly aid of the Belorussian population not a single Jew would have remained among the living. And thousands did remain alive."

The Germans continued to massacre the inhabitants of the ghetto. Nevertheless, the underground organization grew.

The Jews escaped from the ghetto to the forests where they joined the partisans to fight against the Germans. In these forests, Smolyar and his comrades formed a new partisan detachment named after Dzerzhinsky. The Belorussian partisan detachments merged with those which came from the ghetto....

In the second part of his book—*Revenge*—Smolyar describes how men and women from the Minsk ghetto organized seven partisan detachments which afterwards merged with units of the Soviet Army. The fighters of these detachments showed boundless heroism and inflicted great losses on the Germans.

A brave partisan of the Minsk ghetto was machine gunner Boris Khaimovich, participant in 40 partisan battles. In his first skirmish he killed more than 70 Germans. Smolyar writes about the fearless Jewish woman Tsilya Botvinnik who stole a rifle from a German workshop and walked nearly a hundred miles to join the partisans. In the detachment she was offered to take charge of the field kitchen and the scouts; but she refused outright to do such "peaceful" work, and became one of the most daring dynamiters, blowing up five German military trains.

Smolyar tells of an old man who came to the detachment straight from the place of execution where he had lost the whole of his family. In a battle of the partisans against 700 SS men, he killed 10 of the enemy with his rifle. The 12-year-old orphan Willik Rubetin derailed seven German trains in the course of a year. Leonid Okun, who was born in 1930 won four battle Orders.

In 1944, together with the Soviet Army and the Belorussian partisans, the former prisoners of the ghetto entered liberated Minsk.

SPECIAL EDITION OF CLASSIC COMEDY

Alexander Griboyedov. *Wit Works Woe*. The play, articles, and comments. Edited by N. Piksanov and V. Filippov. *Art* Publishing House. Moscow. 289 pages.

The *Art* Publishing House has issued a special edition of this classic work; prepared for press by the Russian Theatrical Society. The edition is intended for theatrical producers and actors. The exact academic text of Griboyedov's play is given, accompanied by articles on the original text of the comedy, written by Professor N. Piksanov, the well-known Griboyedov scholar.

Professor V. Filippov has furnished an analysis of the language of *Wit Works Woe* and has written the comments supplementing the book.

In an article entitled *The Life of Famusov's Moscow* the literary critic N. Ashukin quotes documents of the epoch to portray the life and types of the Moscow society figuring in Griboyedov's comedy.

Piksanov's article describes the various stages of the scenic history of *Wit Works Woe*.

Illustrations to the new edition are taken from old productions of the play and the productions of Moscow and provincial theatres in Soviet times.

NEWS AND VIEWS

LITERATURE

CONFERENCE OF YOUNG WRITERS

One hundred and fifty young writers and poets attended a special conference sponsored by the Union of Soviet Writers in Moscow this March for men and women making their first appearance in literature. Ranging from twenty to thirty years of age the participants constituted a veritable cross section of the multi-national Soviet Union; there were Russians and Uzbeks, Ukrainians and Latvians, Belorussians and Georgians, Armenians and Estonians. Many of them had served in the war.

The main purpose of the gathering was to enable the youth to get the advice and criticism of their older colleagues and to establish personal contact.

The conference opened with addresses by leading Soviet writers and poets on the main tasks of Soviet prose and poetry and the problems of Soviet esthetics following which special sections held analytical discussions of the work of young authors. Personal meetings were also arranged for the youth with writers of the older generation whose style was most akin to their own.

The proceedings of the conference were featured in youth and literary newspapers. *Komsomolskaya Pravda* and *Moskovsky Komsomolets* carried special pages devoted to the session and *Literaturnaya Gazeta* printed a number of articles commenting on the work of young writers.

Speaking on the tasks of literature at the opening of the conference, Nikolai Mikhailov, secretary of the Young Communist League of the Soviet Union, said: "Literature is a soldier which must always be ready to come to grips with the enemy. For literature there can be no place in the rear, it must always be in the firing lines."

An extensive report on the tasks of Soviet literature was delivered by Alexander Fadeyev, Secretary General of the Union of Soviet Writers. He spoke of the responsibility of the writer whose lofty mission it is to give a truthful portrayal of life, to describe real people.

Fadeyev pointed out that all these problems come in the main to one—to give a truthful portrayal of the Soviet man, his new morals, his thoughts and emotions, his spiritual world. The man of the new Socialist society is the central theme of Soviet literature. A Soviet artist must be able to perceive the progressive traits in the character of his contemporaries, must be able to depict his hero in the process of development. This hero exists in real life and bears traits distinguishing him from people in any other society.

Fadeyev emphasized that even in the early years of its development Soviet literature went beyond the multifarious schools of decadence that prevailed at the time and took as its model the great classics of world literature, in the first place, the classics of Russia—Pushkin, Nekrasov, Tolstoy, Chekhov and Gorky. It was they who became the forerunners of Soviet literature, because Man with a capital M was the keynote of their writings, because their literature was humane.

Fadeyev dwelt on the proper organization of the writer's work which is of especial significance for young authors.

Problems of Soviet drama were discussed by Constantine Simonov. He criticized the craftsmen who "cook up" plays that outwardly seem to conform to the requirements of the stage but are devoid of ideas, of genuine human emotions. The playwright must bring to the stage not a superficial sketch of life, however well designed, but life itself.

A detailed report on the development of Soviet poetry was delivered by Victor Pertsov, the critic. He traced the traditions of Mayakovsky in the writings of poets of different generations. Speaking of our young writers he made reference to Sergei Narovchatov's *Bonfire* and Mikhail Lukonin's *To Those Who Returned From the War*.

Pertsov pointed out that Socialist esthetics open up broad vistas for many divergent artistic trends. One has merely to compare Tvardovsky's *Vassili Terkin* whose creative roots extend to Russian poetry of the 19th century with Antokolsky's poem *Son*, springing as it does from the finest poetic heritage of the 20th century, to realize how extensive are the traditions of Soviet poetry.

Pertsov emphasized that the struggle for lofty art is in its essence a struggle for lofty ideas. There can be no esthetics without ethics. A poetic work cannot rise to the summits of artistry unless it contains nobility of idea.

"The esthetics of Socialist realism demand of poetry clarity of image, precision of language and a noble simplicity. But," Pertsov said, "we are against any over-simplification, against mere photography. Poetry must enrich us with its profound artistic perception of life, and not merely resolve itself to recounting platitudes. 'Life's phenomena are gold ingots without any stamp on them and for that reason many refuse to accept them, unable to distinguish them from brass,' wrote Chernyshevsky, the great Russian literary scholar and democrat of the 19th century. The ability to discern these 'gold ingots' is a prime requisite for a poet."

In his speech Ilya Ehrenburg stressed sincerity as an indispensable attribute of the writer. Unless an author is able to make the reader see the world at large through the

prism of his own inner world, his work will be merely the product of a craftsman but not of an artist.

The poet Alexander Tvardovsky gave a brief analysis of his observations on the popularity of poetry among the people. The task of young writers, he said, is to work so that their poetry should step out from the bookshelf and gain currency among the people.

Samuil Marshak, the poet, dwelt on problems of children's literature. He urged young writers to turn to this complex but highly useful sphere of letters.

The speeches of the young writers aroused considerable interest at the conference.

Sergei Narovchatov, the poet, introduced the audience, as it were, to his colleagues of young literary Moscow, by giving an outline of the works of Mikhail Lukonin, Alexei Nedogonov, Alexander Mezhirov, Georgi Shilov, Victor Urin, and others. Most of these young poets fought in the war and their first verses were on war topics.

"It could not have been otherwise," said Narovchatov. "Our first verses were written by the light of bonfires, in dugouts. . . We wrote about things we had seen, about the life we were leading.

"Now life is bringing forth new themes—peaceful labour, the country's revival, the majestic panorama of reconstruction."

Platon Voronko spoke about the young poets of the Ukraine. He himself was a member of the famous guerrilla detachment headed by Sidor Kovpak. The verses he wrote became the marching songs of his comrades-in-arms.

Young writers from Belorussia, Leningrad, Uzbekistan, Moldavia, Kazakhstan and other republics took the floor one after another to tell about their work.

Following the general sessions of the conference, meetings of special sections were held where for three days the work of young authors was subjected to analysis and criticism.

More than 800 poems were discussed at the seven poetry sessions which were guided by such poets as A. Surkov, E. Dolmatovsky, N. Aseyev, M. Svetlov, M. Aligher, A. Tvardovsky and P. Antokolsky.

At the five prose sessions the writings of forty authors were discussed.

The sessions on children's literature guided by S. Marshak and V. Smirnova, took up stories and verse written for the growing generation.

In the course of their stay in Moscow young writers also had the opportunity of meeting personally veteran men of letters and hearing their advice. Nikolai Meisak, from Siberia, spent a day with Vsevolod Vishnevsky to whom he submitted his war stories. Several young poets sought the counsel of Nikolai Tikhonov.

The results of the conference were aptly summed up by Platon Voronko, of the Ukraine. He said:

"I am convinced that the conference will be of tremendous benefit not only to its participants but also to those of our comrades who were unable to attend."

YUGOSLAV WRITERS VISIT SOVIET UNION

A delegation of Yugoslav writers spent three weeks in the Soviet Union visiting Moscow, Leningrad and Kiev. The group, consisting of Serbian, Croatian, Slovene, Montenegrin and Macedonian men of letters was headed by Radovan Zogović, Montenegrin poet.

A literary program in honour of the Yugoslav guests was arranged in Moscow.

"It is pleasant to receive guests, but it is doubly pleasant when these guests are old and tried friends," said Constantine Simonov, in his opening address. The Soviet writer recalled his stay with Yugoslav guerrillas in 1944.

The first to take the floor was the writer Ferdo Kozak, Slovene Minister of Education. He was followed by Čadomir Minderović, Serbian poet, and Dušan Kostić and Radovan Zogović, Montenegrin poets. The Ukrainian poet Maxim Rylsky recited verse from his Yugoslav cycle and the Russian poet Nikolai Tikhonov read his poems dedicated to Yugoslavia.

Ilya Ehrenburg welcomed the visiting authors, following which verses of free Yugoslavia were recited by the Croat, Marin Franičević, the Macedonian, Slavko Janevski, and the Serb, Marko Vraneševič. The audience, which filled the hall to overflowing, accorded the guests a hearty reception.

The Yugoslav authors visited the Union of Soviet Writers where Alexander Fadeyev acquainted them with the structure of the Union, the services and aid it renders its members, copyright laws in the U.S.S.R. and the work of publishing houses.

Radovan Zogović gave a brief outline of the development of Yugoslav literature in the past decades.

The visit of Yugoslav writers stimulated interest in the literature of that country. The Union of Soviet Writers is to publish an anthology of Yugoslav literature in the Russian language as well as collections of modern Yugoslav poetry in the languages of the sixteen Union republics. A collection of the work of modern Yugoslav authors is to be put out in a large edition by the popular library series of the magazine *Ogonyek*.

HONOUR AUTHOR OF *FIFTY YEARS IN THE SERVICE*

Moscow writers, actors, artists and representatives of the Soviet Army joined in paying tribute to Lieutenant General Alexei Ignatyev, author of *Fifty Years in the Service*, on the occasion of his 70th birthday.

As a military man and diplomat Ignatyev visited many countries both in the East and the West and in 1917, at the outbreak of the October revolution, he held the post of Russia's military attaché in France. During the last several years he has been working on his memoirs which cover a period of half a century. The volumes published so far have won popularity both by virtue of their interesting subject matter and high literary merit.

At the jubilee evening held at the Moscow Writers' Club Ignatyev announced that he is completing the fifth volume of his memoirs and he read the last chapter of the book.

TRANSLATIONS OF CLASSICS AND MODERN WORKS INTO THE UZBEK LANGUAGE

To bring their people the finest creations of Russian and western literature in their native tongue many noted writers and poets of Uzbekistan are working on translations. Abdulla Kakhar is finishing his translations of the first volume of Tolstoy's *War and Peace* and Mirtemit Tursunov expects to hand in Homer's *Odyssey* in the Uzbek language to the publishers in the near future. The poet Gafur Gulyam is translating Dante's *Inferno* and Sheikhzade is rendering into the Uzbek Byron's *Childe Harold*. Sheikhzade has completed a translation of *Hamlet* which is to be staged by the Khamza Theatre.

A number of Nekrasov's verses and poems have already been published in the Uzbek language. Wanda Wasilewska's *Only Love* has been translated by the young poet Askad Mukhtar. The poet R. Babadzhanov is now working on Tvardovsky's poem *Vassili Terkin*.

800th ANNIVERSARY OF NIZAMI, GREAT AZERBAIJAN POET

The 800th anniversary of Nizami of Ganja, great Azerbaijan national poet, will be marked throughout the Soviet Union according to plans drawn up by the government of the Azerbaijan republic jointly with the Union of Soviet Writers.

Nizami. Portrait by S. Salamzade

Elaborate preparations for the jubilee in October are being made in Azerbaijan. Guests from all the other Soviet republics will be invited to Azerbaijan to honour the memory of one of the greatest classics of the Orient. The anniversary was to have been commemorated in 1941 but was postponed owing to the outbreak of the war. A Nizami Museum has been opened in Baku and a majestic monument to the poet is now taking shape on the square facing the museum.

Nizami memorial programs and lectures on his life and work are being arranged throughout Azerbaijan by a special Government jubilee committee which is also sponsoring the publication of the *Storehouse of Mysteries*, *Khosrau and Shirin* and *Iskander-Name* as well as studies of Nizami and his time in both the Azerbaijan and Russian languages.

The Azerbaijan State Opera Theatre is staging two operas for the occasion—Badalbeili's *Nizami* and Niyazi's *Khosrau and Shirin*.

Azerbaijan's best opera singers are to take part in the production of *Nizami*, which will be one of the highlights of the jubilee celebration.

A special Nizami Jubilee Committee headed by Nikolai Tikhonov, has been formed by the Union of Soviet Writers. It is charged with drawing up a detailed plan for measures to popularize the works of Nizami and arrange for their translation into the various languages spoken in the Soviet Union.

The *Soviet Writer* Publishing House is issuing the selected works of the Azerbaijan classic for the anniversary. A series of Nizami evenings is to be arranged under the auspices of the Writers' Union.

THEATRE

MOSCOW ART THEATRE STAGES CHIRSKOV'S *THE VICTORS*

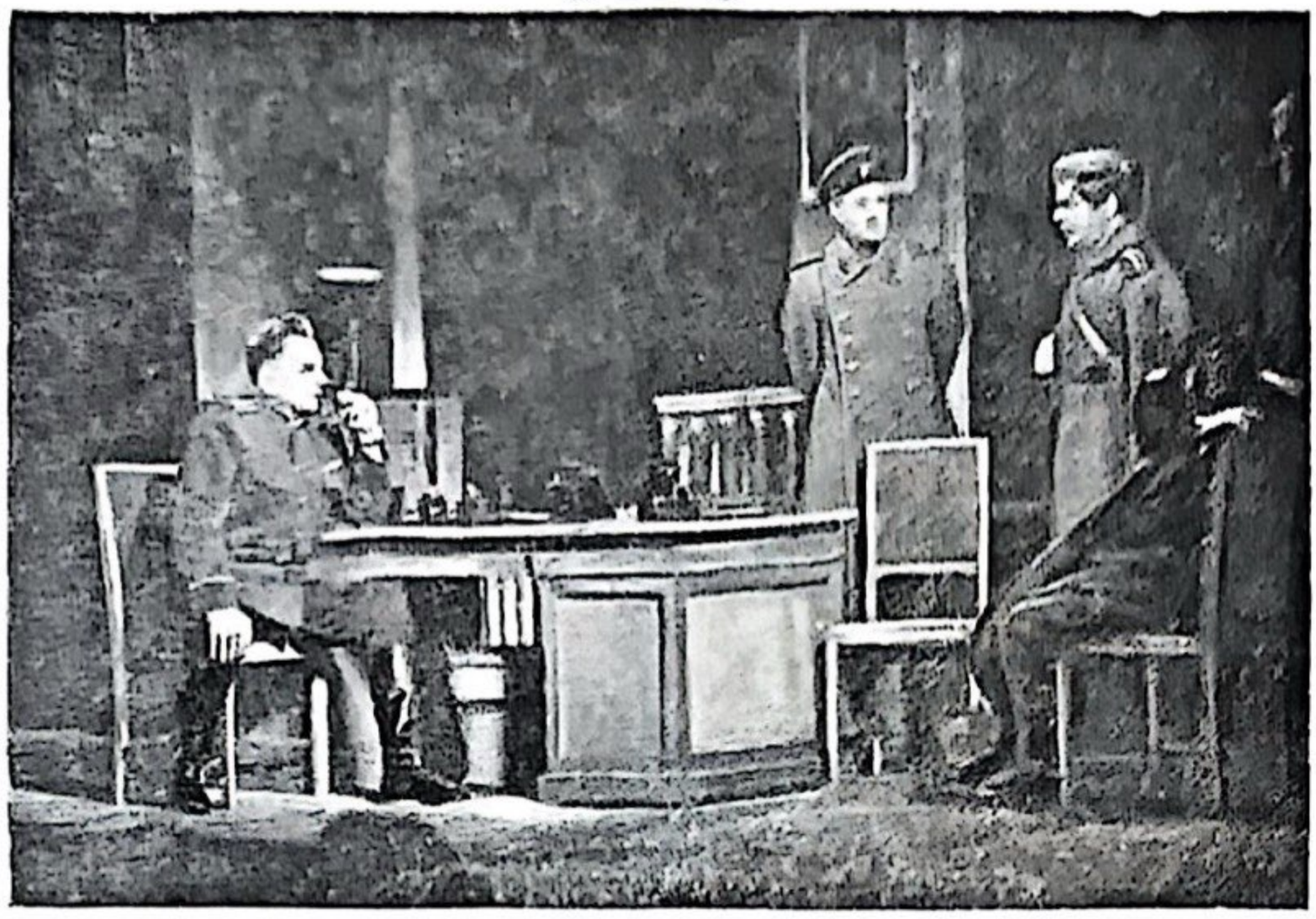
Intellectual drama has always been the cornerstone of the repertoire of the Moscow Art Theatre. The method of Stanislavsky and Nemirovich-Danchenko, the theatre's founders, consists in revealing the inner world of the characters, their psychology, their feelings and their attitude to life. From this standpoint Boris Chirskov's play *The Victors* (see *Soviet Literature*, No. 7, 1946) is well suited for the Art Theatre since the history of one of the world's greatest battles is presented not as a clash of two armies but as a contest of two military doctrines.

By portraying the national character, social relations and new principles of Soviet military science, the play reveals the substance of Stalin's strategy which assured the defeat of the Germans.

Nikolai Bogolyubov, well-known stage and cinema actor, plays the central role, that of Colonel General Muravyov. The actor conveys the army commander's unbending will, his clarity of thought and ability to foresee the development of events on the field of battle, showing him at the same time to

be a man with warmth and a great sense of humour.

Muravyov personifies the main theme of the play, the assertion of the will of a man who does not reconcile himself to the development of events but applies all his energies and abilities to changing them, to fighting for what he thinks is right no matter what the odds may be. Muravyov himself puts it aptly in the following words: "Any able commander can properly evaluate a situation and deduce from it what task should be carried out, but only a real army leader can set the task and himself create the conditions necessary for its accomplishment."



The Victors, *scene from act I*

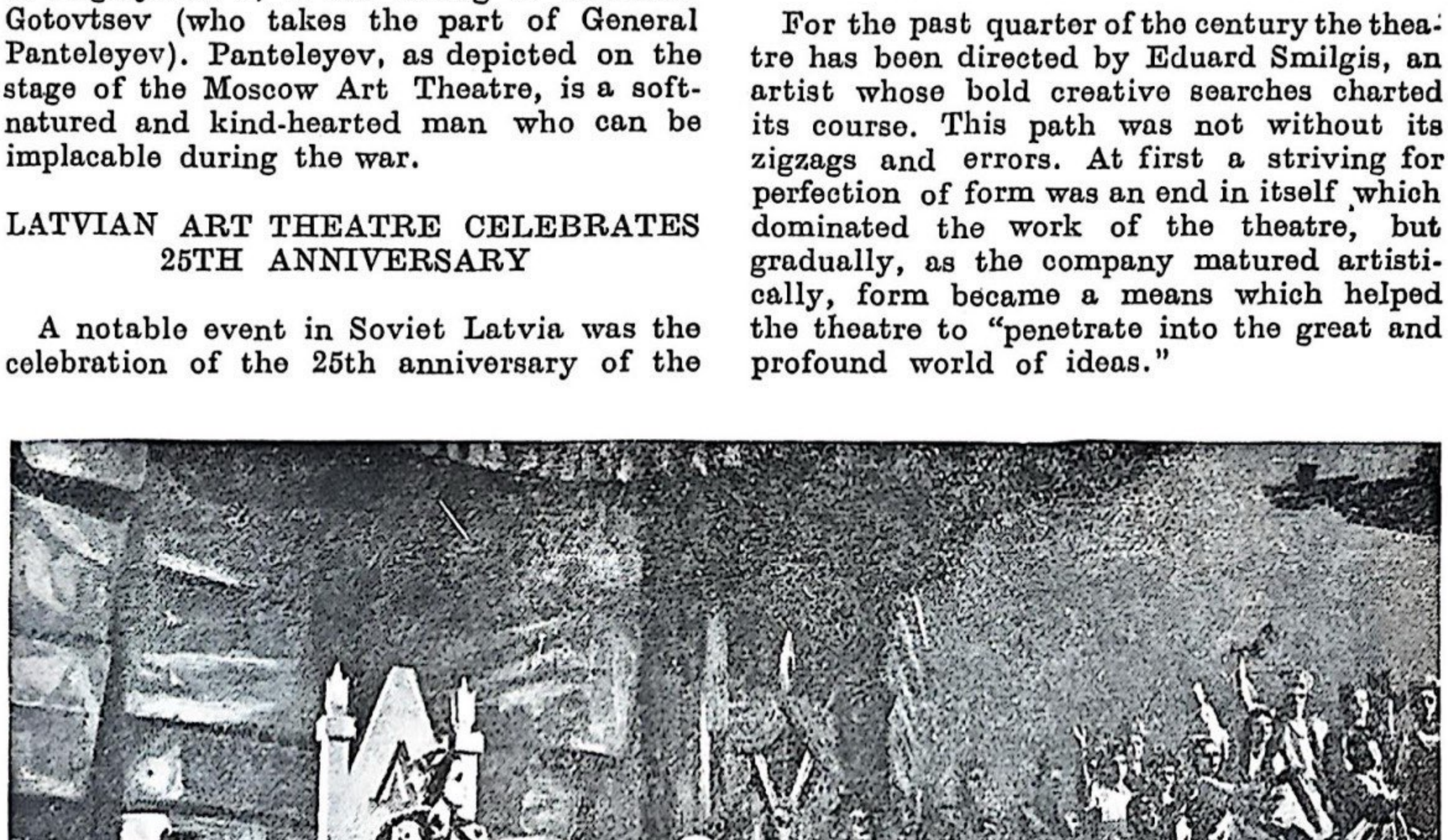
Victor Stanitsyn, the producer, has succeeded in attaining a high level of performance by all the actors which assures that ensemble acting for which the Moscow Art Theatre is famous. Particularly outstanding, in addition to Bogolyubov's, is the acting of Vladimir Gotovtsev (who takes the part of General Panteleyev). Panteleyev, as depicted on the stage of the Moscow Art Theatre, is a soft-natured and kind-hearted man who can be implacable during the war.

LATVIAN ART THEATRE CELEBRATES 25TH ANNIVERSARY

A notable event in Soviet Latvia was the celebration of the 25th anniversary of the Art Theatre which now assembles the flower of the country's actors.

A national institution, the theatre was founded with the active participation of Jan Rainis, Latvia's greatest poet, whose plays *Indulis and Aria* and *Fire and Night* were among the first productions of the new playhouse.

For the past quarter of the century the theatre has been directed by Eduard Smilgis, an artist whose bold creative searches charted its course. This path was not without its zigzags and errors. At first a striving for perfection of form was an end in itself which dominated the work of the theatre, but gradually, as the company matured artistically, form became a means which helped the theatre to "penetrate into the great and profound world of ideas."



Fire and Night, *staged by the Latvian Art Theatre*

The theatre's repertoire now includes in addition to the works of Jan Rainis, Andrei Upits' historic tragedy *Spartacus*, Vilis Lacis' *Victory* and Maxim Gorky's *Egor Bulychov*, as well as Boris Lavrenov's *To Those at Sea*.

For its jubilee performance the theatre revived Rainis' *Fire and Night*, one of the first plays on its repertoire. Greater profundity and penetration into the poetic ideas of the author marked the new production whose portrayal of the battles of ancient epochs rings in unison with the events of our times.

CINEMA

GLINKA—FILM ABOUT THE GREAT RUSSIAN COMPOSER

The release of *Glinka*, a full-length musical film, coincided with the 90th anniversary of the death of Mikhail Glinka, the founder of Russian classical music.

This picture is not a screen biography of the composer, but rather an attempt to trace the development of the artist. "The main conception of the scenario," says the producer Lev Arnstam, "has its origin not in data about the composer's life but in an analysis of his music."

The sources of Glinka's music and his transformation of folk melodies into musical forms of classical compositions are portrayed thanks to the joint efforts of the film producer and the composer Vissarion Shebalin.

The film shows young Glinka, a mere boy, as he listens to the song of a peasant girl. Many years later the same motif which had struck deep roots in Glinka's mind, emerges again, this time transformed by the creative genius of the composer into the aria of Antonida in the opera *Ivan Susanin*.

The film embraces a period of nearly forty years. The spectator beholds scenes of life in Russia at the beginning of the 19th century, life on a landlord's estate, a serf village, the Napoleonic invasion and the Patriotic War of 1812, St. Petersburg society, literary salons, the theatre of those days. . . The figures of Alexander Pushkin, Vassili Zhukovsky and other luminaries in the world of the arts and letters are revived on the screen.

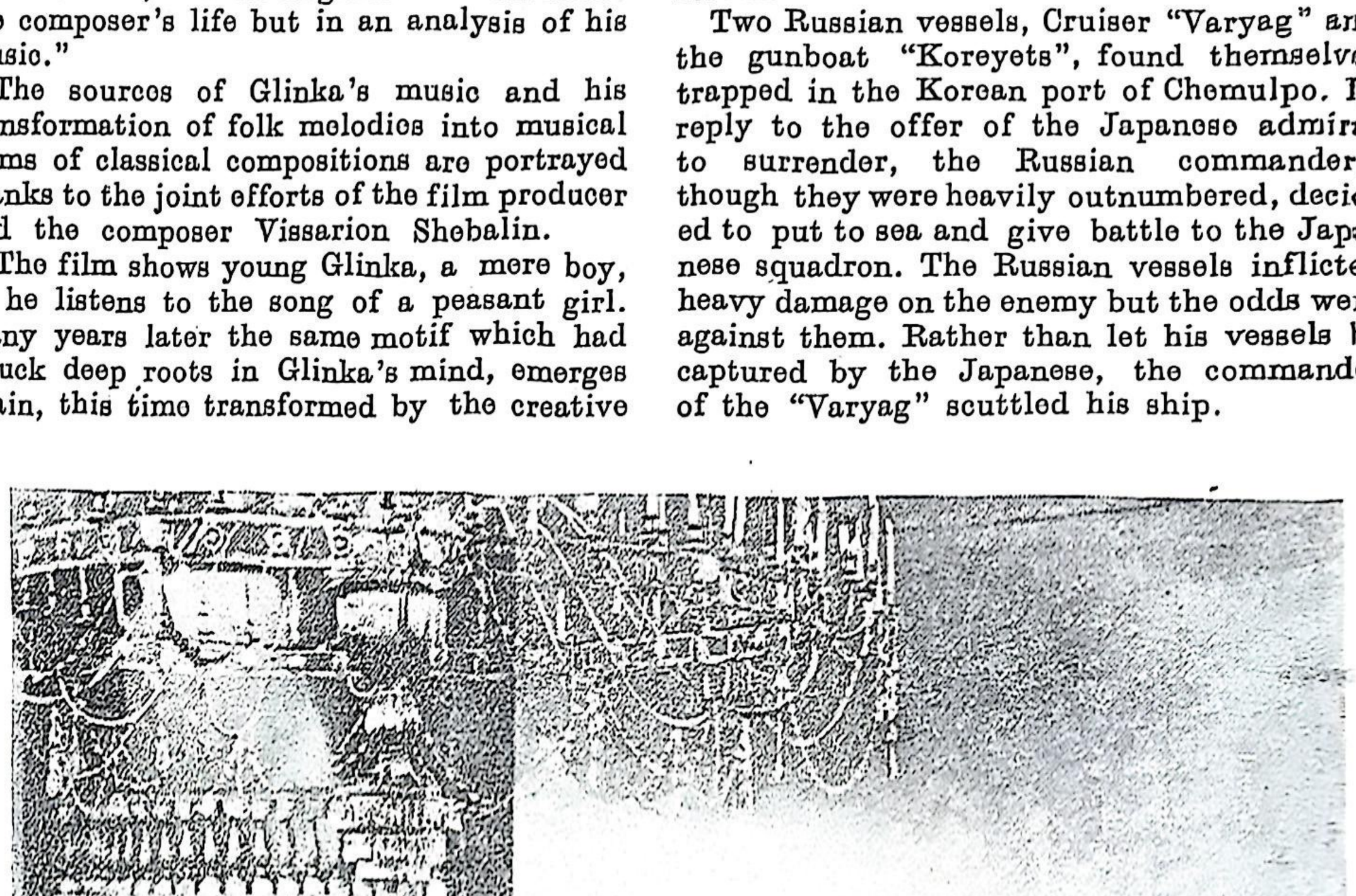
The culminating point of the film is the première of Glinka's opera *Ivan Susanin* in St. Petersburg in 1836.

The role of Glinka is played by Boris Chirkov, well known to film audiences for his work in the *Maxim* trilogy. The role of Glinka the boy is well acted by Sasha Sobolev, a music school pupil.

SCREEN REVIVES HEROIC EXPLOIT OF CRUISER *VARYAG*

The historical film *Cruiser Varyag* makes one of the most dramatic episodes of the Russo-Japanese war of 1904-1905 relive on the screen.

Two Russian vessels, Cruiser "Varyag" and the gunboat "Koreyets", found themselves trapped in the Korean port of Chemulpo. In reply to the offer of the Japanese admiral to surrender, the Russian commanders, though they were heavily outnumbered, decided to put to sea and give battle to the Japanese squadron. The Russian vessels inflicted heavy damage on the enemy but the odds were against them. Rather than let his vessels be captured by the Japanese, the commander of the "Varyag" scuttled his ship.



Still from the film Glinka

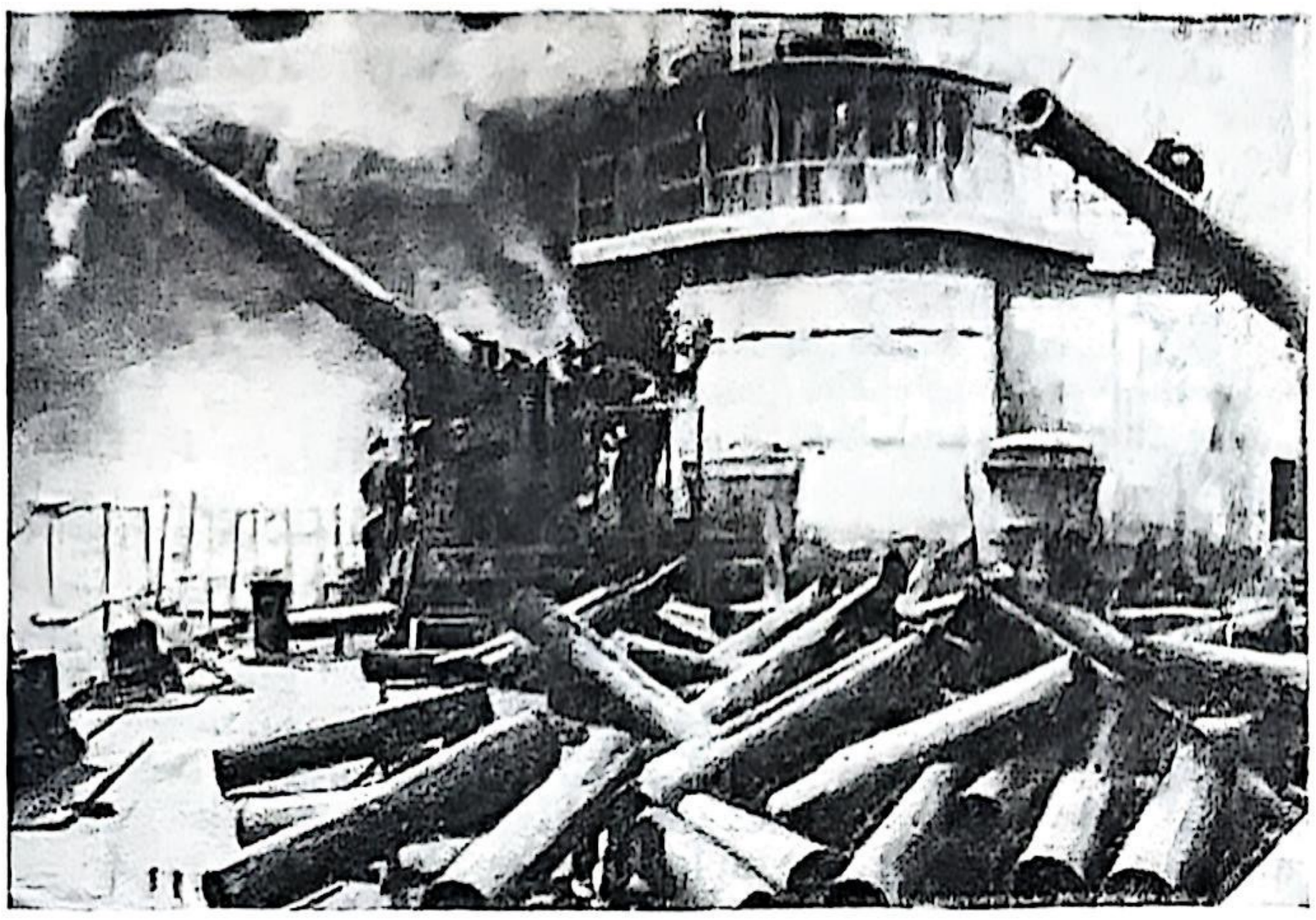
The very first shots of the film take the spectator into the tense atmosphere of impending tragedy. Three figures stand poised on the captain's bridge braving a heavy downpour and strong wind. As the boats sail the stormy leaden waves, the commander is informed that a torpedo has just passed the stern.

The atmosphere of the approaching battle is depicted with great force. Both vessels raise their anchors and as the flag is hoisted, the roll of drums and the blowing of bugles is heard. The entire crew is lined up on deck.

"Remember men of the "Varyag" that to die as we shall under this flag, means never to die," the commander says, addressing them. "Let us show the enemy how Russian sailors can fight for their homeland. . . ."

Skillful montage conveys both the scope and the force of the ensuing naval battle.

To produce this film regisseur Victor Eisymont did not use a studio-built dummy warship but the cruiser "Aurora", which in 1917 was the ship which fired the first shell heralding the beginning of the October Socialist Revolution.



Still from the film The Cruiser "Varyag"

DOCUMENTARY FILM ON SOVIET LATVIA

Can a documentary which is a film record of events have a definite plot? A positive answer is supplied by *Soviet Latvia*, one of the documentaries in the series on life and work in the Soviet republics.

The film consists of separate screen stories concerning the past and present of Riga, the age-old struggle of the Latvian people against the German invaders, the culture of Soviet Latvia, the labour effort of the people, post-war revival of the country—all integral parts of the scenario of Boris Agapov.

Life in the Latvian village is shown through the fate of two peasants, Janis Kaktyns and Marta Zimin. Kaktyns who returns home after demobilization, finds his family and with the help of the government sets out to cultivate the land he receives under the agrarian reform.

Marta Zimin had been an agricultural labourer all her life. Now she has her own land and cottage. An honest and industrious woman, she won the respect of her fellow villagers. The people elect her their deputy to the Supreme Soviet of the U.S.S.R. This former farm hand is shown in the Kremlin as she takes part in the work of the highest legislative body in the Soviet Union.

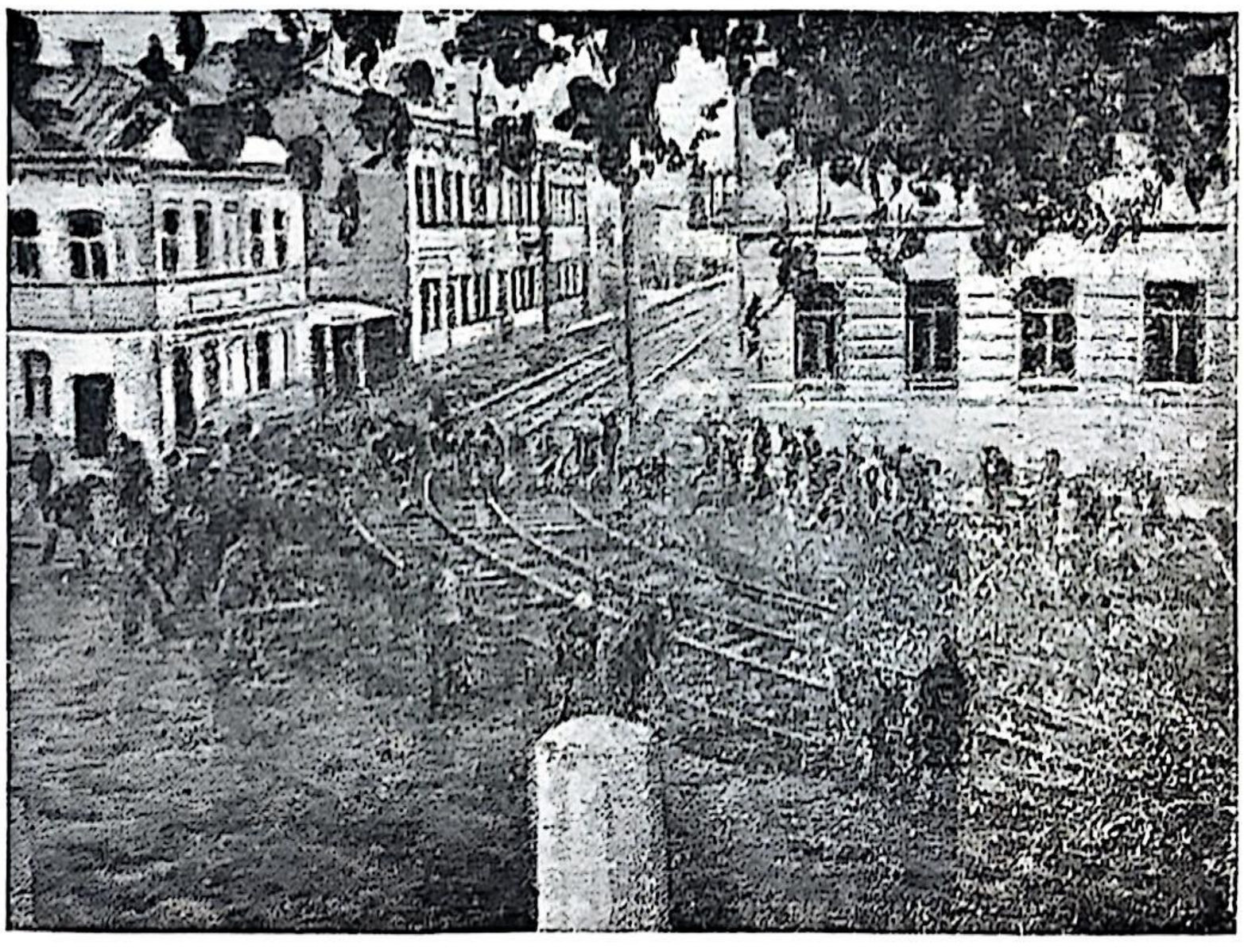
The moviegoer is taken for a trip across all of Latvia; he visits seaside resorts, schools and artists' studios, construction sites and popular festivities; he hears national songs and meets on the screen some of Latvia's outstanding men of science and the arts.

ART

EXHIBITION OF GRAPHIC ARTS

The works of three graphic artists, I. Sokolov, V. Bibikov and N. Sheverdyaev, were displayed at a recent Moscow exhibition.

The works on display enable the visitor to trace the artistic development of Sokolov. The artist's early efforts, dating back to the twenties, evince a high technique particularly in linoleum engraving which is Sokolov's favourite medium. His skill of execution, however, was not accompanied in those days by a clear understanding of the task of the artist as regards content. In search of a theme



Still from the film Soviet Latvia

and a hero Sokolov went from one extreme to another, from the petty scenes of daily life (*Old Woman Reading* and *At Work*) to the gloomy but expressive studies of a woman's body done in black and white. In time, however, the artist succeeded in finding realistic methods.

That change came in the thirties. While travelling through the country, observing every-day life and sketching the grandiose battle of industrialization, he began to feel the fast-beating pulse of reality. A series of portraits and large landscape compositions are imbued with optimistic romanticism and a vigorous assertion of life. Outstanding among Sokolov's portraits are those of Lenin and Gorky.

Sokolov's landscape engravings refute the traditional view point about the limited scope and applied nature of the graphic art. The landscapes are complete "canvases"—both as to their form—and what is more important—their force of expression and the way the image is finished and polished. *Summer*, *Autumn in Kuzminki*, *Landscape With Figures*—are large coloured linoleum engravings with no trace of the sketchiness in the depiction of nature so frequently found in the works of graphic artists.

The theme of the Patriotic War also finds expression in Sokolov's landscapes (the cycle of *Moscow in 1942*), where the artist's skill in conveying lofty human emotions in landscapes attains great height. The grim spirit of the time is well portrayed in the engraving *Wartime Moscow*. With measured tread troops pass across Red Square. One feels the strong gusts of wind that drive torn clouds overhead and there is an air of tenseness in the Kremlin walls with the rays of the setting sun playing on them.

By comparison the works of the other two artists on display are less impressive. Bibikov has exhibited a number of sketches of war scenes done at the northern front in 1943 and 1944. The artist, however, seldom rises above mere reportage.

A field in which Bibikov is original is the small landscape engravings which could serve as excellent book illustrations.

Outstanding among the works of Sheverdyaev are the portraits of Leo Tolstoy and Ibsen. A keen power of observation and chiselled form distinguish his portrayal of animals.

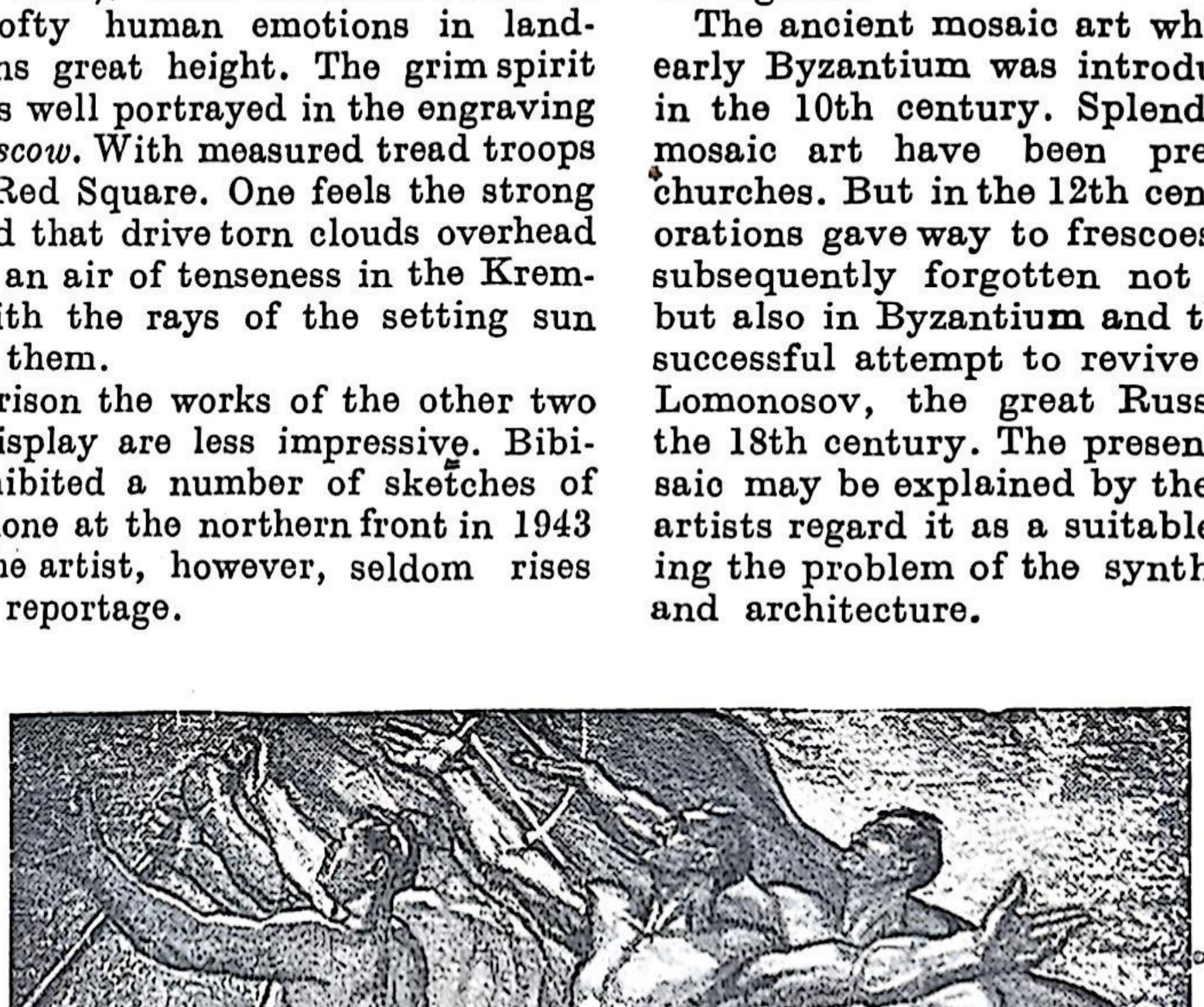
WORK ON MOSAIC FOR MAIN HALL OF PALACE OF SOVIETS

A revival of the mosaic as a form of monumental art is now under way in the Soviet Union. A group of young artists, under the guidance of Pavel Korin, are now working on mosaic decorations for the main hall of the Palace of Soviets in Moscow.

The walls are to be decorated with a continuous frieze nearly fifty feet in height. The theme of the mosaic is *March Into the Future*. The figures of marching men and women have their heads thrown back in a free and strong movement and their hands bearing the staffs of banners extend forward.

The background of the mosaic is a lack-lustre gold. The human figures are done in soft pale chocolate colours with bluish-olive shades and sharply delineated brown contours that provide a happy neutral between the gold of the background and the light tone of the figures.

The ancient mosaic art which flourished in early Byzantium was introduced into Russia in the 10th century. Splendid specimens of mosaic art have been preserved in Kiev churches. But in the 12th century mosaic decorations gave way to frescoes and the art was subsequently forgotten not only in Russia but also in Byzantium and the West. An unsuccessful attempt to revive it was made by Lomonosov, the great Russian scientist, in the 18th century. The present interest in mosaic may be explained by the fact that Soviet artists regard it as a suitable means for solving the problem of the synthesis of painting and architecture.



A fragment of mosaic for the Palace of Soviets

Editor-in-chief: ALEXANDER KARAGANOV